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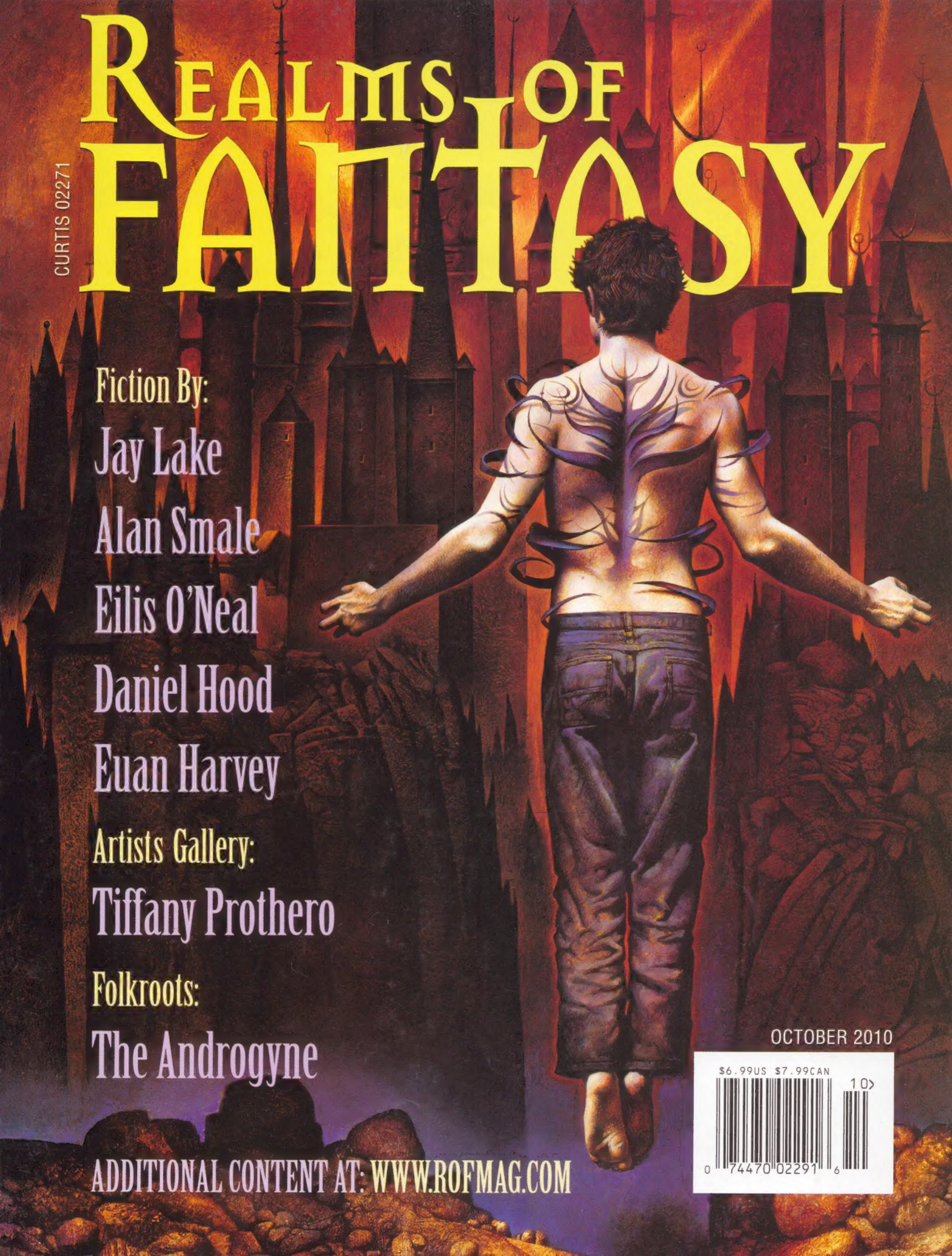

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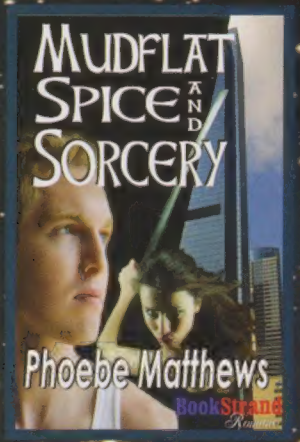

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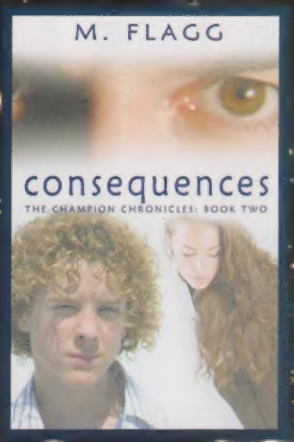

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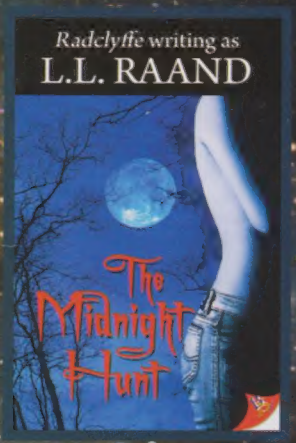

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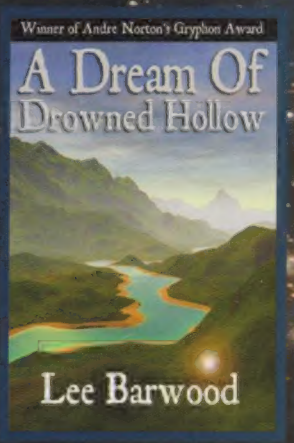

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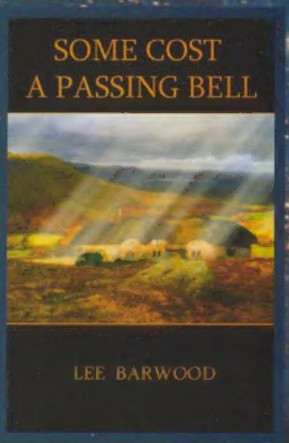

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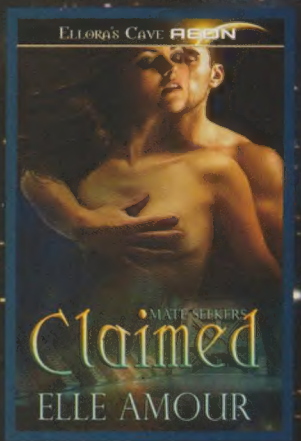

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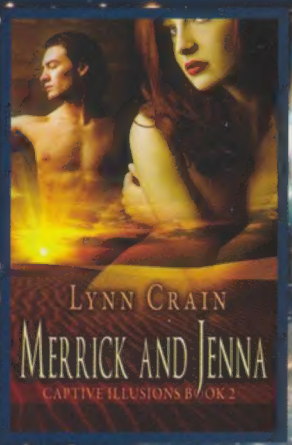

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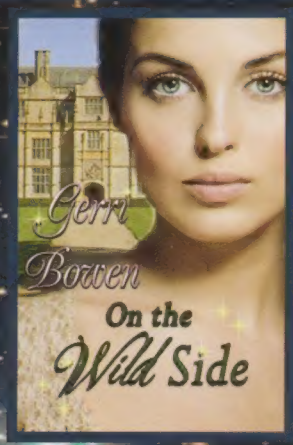

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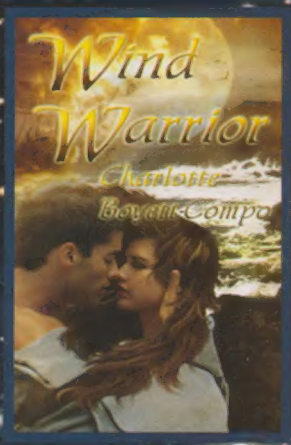

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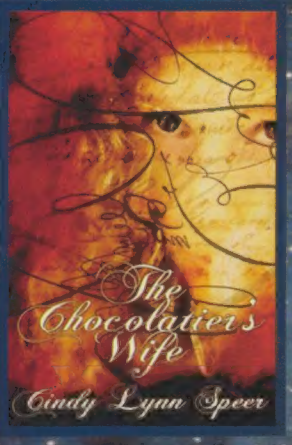

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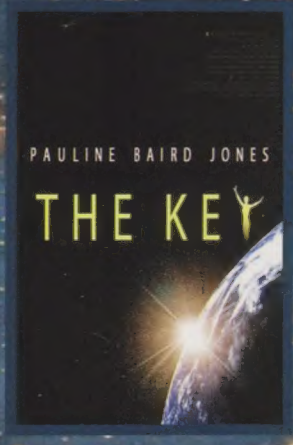

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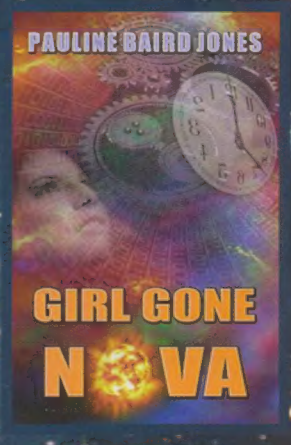

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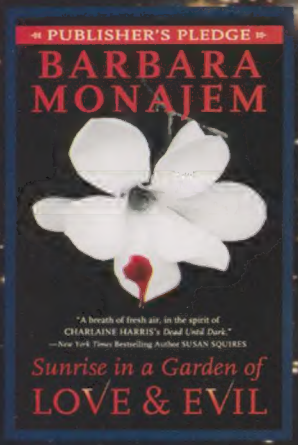

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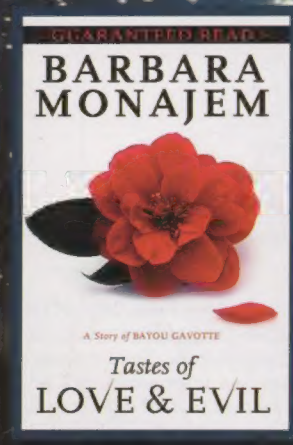

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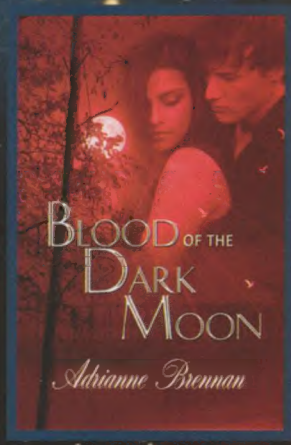

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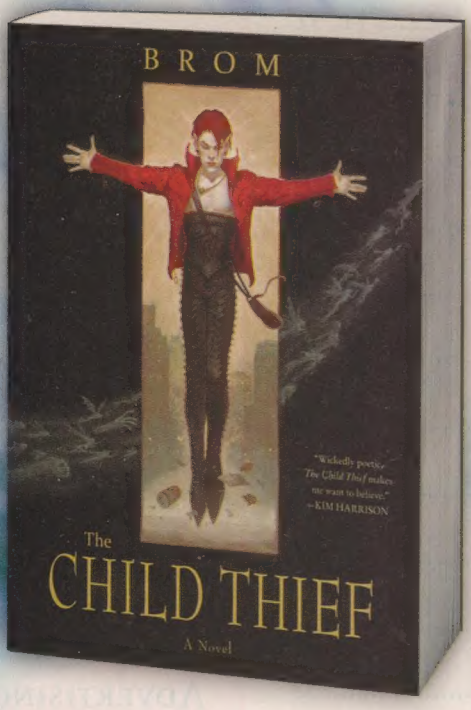

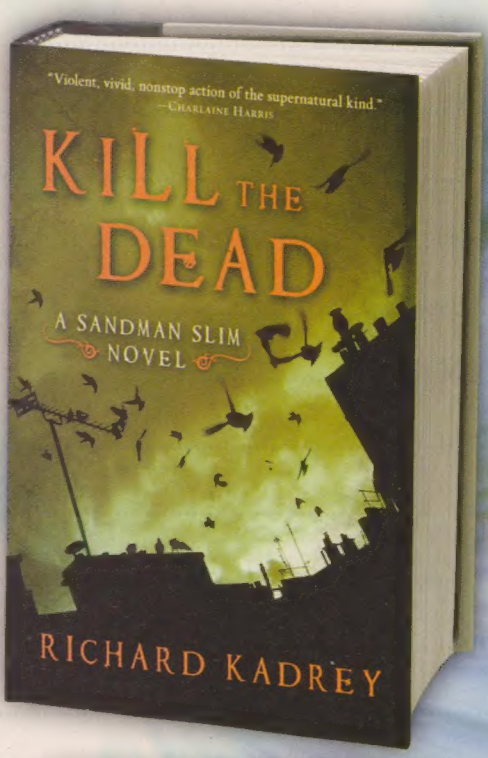

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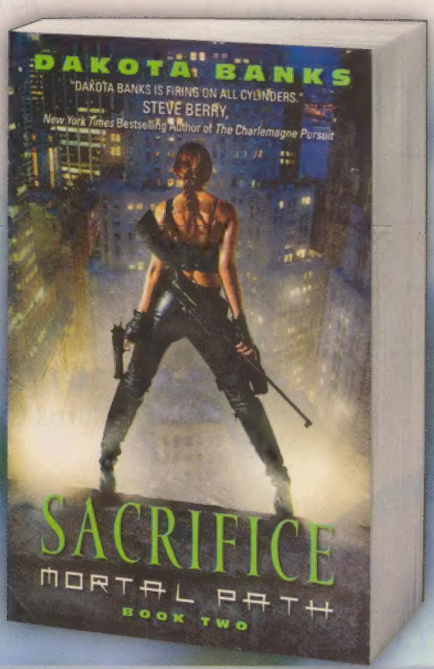

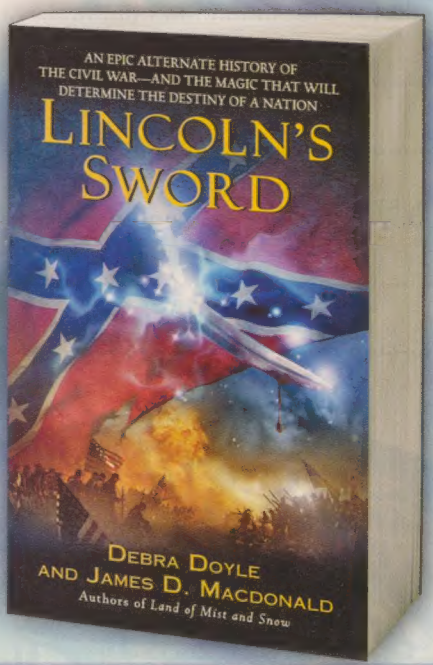
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Movies

Some Potential Gems Sparkle among This Fall's Fantasy Movies

by Resa Nelson

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World from Universal Pictures

Following in the footsteps of fantasy blockbusters like *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Iron Man 2* isn't easy. As this summer's blockbuster season comes to an end, are we likely to see any more successful fantasy films? Maybe. Maybe not. But one thing is certain: among the upcoming batch of fantasy and horror films, a few potential gems are shining brightly.

At first glance, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (slated for release from Universal Pictures on August 13) appears to be a mildly amusing film. Based on a graphic novel by Bryan Lee O'Malley, the story centers on a twenty-three-year-old slacker. Scott Pilgrim (played by Michael Cera of *Juno* and *Year One*) has no job. He spends his time playing bass for a run-of-the-mill garage band and dating a high school girl. He's never had any difficulty finding girlfriends. He may be a slacker in the world of work but not in the world of romance. However, that doesn't mean his love life is easy. A former girlfriend who broke his heart is back in town. At the same time, he's trying to pry himself loose from his teenage girlfriend. The last thing he needs is one more romantic interest in his life.

Out of the blue, he starts dreaming about a beautiful delivery girl on roller blades. Soon, Scott discovers his dream girl Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead of *Live Free or Die Hard*, *Final Destination 3*, and *Sky High*) is real. There's just one very serious problem. She has seven ex-lovers, and they're all about to stand in Scott's way. To make matters worse, Scott lives in a world where superheroes and supervillains are real. Scott finds himself in serious trouble as Ramona's exes, all sporting deadly superpowers, join forces to kill him.

What makes this movie noteworthy is the talent behind the scenes. Director Edgar Wright was a well-known TV director in the United Kingdom who gained wide recognition with his first feature film, *Shaun of the Dead*, followed up by *Hot Fuzz*. Wright's style is edgy and his humor is sharp. Considering Wright's talent and success with previous films, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* shows real promise as a comedy set in a world of superheroes.

Parents with young children should keep an eye out for *Nanny McPhee Returns* (August 20 from Universal Pictures and Working Title Pictures), a sequel to *Nanny McPhee*, a film about a character whose looks are unsettling but who acts as a modern-day Mary Poppins in helping families mend their unhappy ways and get back on the right track. Emma Thompson (*Pride and Prejudice*, the *Harry Potter* movies) returns to play the uni-browed and wart-covered Nanny McPhee. Unlike the sweet and lovely Mary Poppins, Nanny McPhee is vinegary and a little scary, although there is a method to her madness. She'd be perfectly at home on a TV series about nannies that move into homes ruled by children's bad behavior.

In this sequel, Nanny comes to the aide of a young mother whose husband is away at war. She and her two children live on the family farm, which may not be the tidiest home but is certainly filled with happiness. One day their spoiled cousins from the city arrive, horrified to discover they've come to the "land of poo." As the children battle, the young mother learns that she may be at risk of losing the farm. Can Nanny McPhee save the day?

The Nanny McPhee movies are based on a series of children's books by Christianna Brand. Assuming the sequel has the same heart and soul as the original movie, it should make good fare for very young children who find delight in bathroom humor. However, it probably won't appeal to older children. Also, parents should realize they

Nanny McPhee Returns from Universal and Working Title Pictures

Milla Jovovich in Resident Evil: Afterlife

won't find the kind of wit that keeps adults entertained as much as their children. Nanny McPhee is strictly for the younger set.

Following in the footsteps of faux documentaries like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity*, and *The Fourth Kind*, *The Last Exorcism* (Lionsgate, August 27) is about an evangelical preacher, Cotton Marcus (played by Patrick Fabian of TV's *Big Love*, *Veronica Mars*), who grows a conscience after years of taking money under false pretenses from hard-working people. He has made a career from performing fake exorcisms for people who simply imagined they had demonic problems. Now disillusioned by the way he has led his life, Cotton decides to make amends by exposing the deceitfulness of his ministry. He invites a documentary film crew to record his final days as a fraudulent exorcist. A poor farmer has written to Cotton, begging him to exorcise demons from the farmer's land. But when Cotton meets the farmer's daughter, who seems to be genuinely possessed, he finally turns to his own faith.

Produced by Eli Roth (*Cabin Fever*, *Hostel*), *The Last Exorcism* is already generating buzz as one of the most promising horror films of the year. Decades ago, religious-themed movies like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* ruled the box office. Moviegoers were so overwhelmed by *The Exorcist* that many walked out of the theater. *Rosemary's Baby* won critical acclaim, and people brave enough to see it talked about it for weeks. Combining a faux documentary approach with a religious theme could make *The Last Exorcism* an unusual and unexpected winner.

One film that looks like it has the potential to be surprisingly good is *Piranha 3D*, scheduled for release on August 20 from Dimension Films. Sure, there have been piranha horror fests in the past. And like many movies these days, it's jumping on the 3D bandwagon. But this one has a premise that taps into the underlying fears of today's society: Will our high school and college kids be safe when they go on vacation with their friends?

Set in a Southwest town called Lake Victoria, the local sheriff (Elisabeth Shue of *Leaving Las Vegas*) prepares for the biggest event of the year. During Spring Break, the town's population of 5,000 handles a whopping 20,000 students who come to the nearby lake on vacation. The problem is that the lake rests on top of the crater of a prehistoric volcano. Days before the hordes arrive, an earthquake opens a crevice at the bottom of the lake, which cracks open the crater. When a diver investigates, he discovers a new underwater chamber that is now accessible via a 200-foot chasm. Inside that chamber, he discovers a massive number of prehistoric piranhas and the eggs they've laid.

When one piranha is captured and taken to a lab, scientists determine it is a species believed to have been extinct for two million years. But instead of being extinct, this species has simply been trapped beneath the lake and is now free to take it over. The fish hunt in packs. When one piranha draws blood from a victim, a feeding frenzy begins. Similar to the plot of *Jaws*, Shue's character must figure out how to keep the students on Spring Break out of the water because the town isn't willing to close the lake.

Piranha 3D is directed by Alexandre Aja (*The Hills Have Eyes*) and stars Shue, Jerry O'Connell (TV's *Crossing Jordan*, *Samantha Who?*), Ving Rhames (*Surrogates*, *Pulp Fiction*), Christopher Lloyd (the *Back to the Future* movies), Steven R. McQueen (TV's *The Vampire Diaries*), Jessica Szohr (TV's *Gossip Girl*), and in a stroke of brilliant casting, Richard Dreyfuss (*Jaws*). With the look and feel of a modern-day *Jaws*, this film could become a sleeper hit.

Fans of the *Resident Evil* series of movies, spawned by the video game, should look for the most recent installment from Screen Gems, *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, on September 10. The series began with *Resident Evil* (2002), in which Alice (Milla Jovovich of *The Fourth Kind*, *Ultraviolet*) awakens in a state of amnesia inside an empty mansion. Eventually, she learns she was an employee of the Umbrella Corporation, the site of a disaster where the security system locked employees inside the Hive, the company's secret underground genetic research facility, where they were killed. Alice joins forces with others to shut this security system down, but they unwittingly release the dead employees (who are now zombies) and experiments from

Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole from Warner Bros.

the labs. In *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), zombies have taken over Raccoon City, and Alice discovers she was an Umbrella Corporation experiment; she has been bio-genetically enhanced with superpowers. She rescues uninfected people, and they strive to escape the city despite its hoards of undead. *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) takes place years after the Raccoon City disaster. Zombies escaped the city and destroyed humanity, leaving a wasteland behind. On her own, and still enhanced with superpowers, Alice helps a group of human survivors in a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas. While they strive to kill zombies, an Umbrella scientist develops an anti-virus to domesticate zombies.

In this year's *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, Alice's mission is to find human survivors and lead them to safety, while still continuing her battle against the Umbrella Corporation. An old friend shows up to offer help, and Alice learns about a safe haven in Los Angeles. However, once she leads other survivors to L.A., they find the city overrun with zombies. Alice soon realizes she has walked into a trap.

One of the most exciting horror films of 2008 was the award-winning and critically acclaimed *Let the Right One In*, a Swedish movie about a vampire. In many cases, the remake of a good foreign movie spells disaster. Why remake a movie that gets it right the first time? For audiences who blanch at the thought of reading subtitles, *Let Me In* (scheduled for release on October 1 from Overture Films) could be just the ticket. This remake might work because it is directed by Matt Reeves, best known for *Cloverfield*.

Kodi Smit-McPhee in Let the Right One In

In this American remake, twelve-year-old Owen (Kodi Smit-McPhee of *The Road*) is an alienated boy living in a small town in New Mexico. His parents are getting divorced. He's targeted by bullies at school. Owen finds solace in plotting against them and spying on his neighbors in the apartment complex where he lives. When Abby (Chloe Moretz of *500 Days of Summer*, TV's *Dirty Sexy Money*) and her father (Richard Jenkins of *The Kingdom*, TV's *Six Feet Under*) move into the complex, she strikes up a friendship with Owen.

As much as he likes Chloe, Owen can't help but notice her strange behavior. She doesn't go to school. Instead, she stays inside her heavily curtained apartment all day. When she comes out to play at night, she's usually barefoot, even in winter. A string of grisly murders strikes the town, and Chloe's father goes missing. Terrified, she still refuses Owen's offer to help. And he

begins to wonder if she has something to do with the murders.

Let the Right One In is currently available on DVD. The Swedish original is so impressive that fans should rent it first and then see the American remake in theaters.

Another promising film for adults and children alike is *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole*, a 3-D animated movie from Warner Bros. scheduled for release on September 24. Based on the first three books in a series of twelve by children's author Kathryn Lasky, the story is a fantasy grounded in reality. Lasky researched owls and their behavior with the intent of writing a nonfiction book about them. Instead, her fantasy books are laced with fascinating details about these animals.

The story focuses on Soren, a young Barn Owl growing up with his siblings in his family's nest in the Forest Kingdom of Tyto. Soren's father tells the young owls stories about Glaux, the most ancient order of owls from which all other owls descended. The Glaux had an order of knightly owls from a kingdom called Ga'Hoole that would rise each night and perform noble deeds. These knightly owls only spoke the truth, and their purpose was to right all wrongs, make weak owls strong, mend the broken, vanquish the proud, and make powerless those who would abuse the frail. When Soren's brother questions the truth of the story, their father tells them a legend is a story you begin to feel in your gizzard and in time it becomes true in your heart. Although his brother quickly dismisses the story of these knightly owls, Soren embraces it, believing that these owls still exist.

One day Soren tumbles 100 feet to the ground when his brother pushes him out of the nest. With their parents out hunting, Soren is alone on the forest floor and is soon kidnapped by an owl and taken to the St. Aegolius Academy for Orphaned Owls, even though he knows he's not an orphan. Here, along with dozens of other baby owls who haven't learned how to fly yet, Soren is given a number instead of a name and herded to an area from which they can't escape until they're old enough to fly. The young owls are marched in formation at strange hours of the day and night to disorient them, but Soren manages to keep his wits about him while most of his peers simply fall in line and do whatever they're told. Soren quietly makes a few new friends and discovers they are being brainwashed as soldiers. Along with his friends, Soren is determined to find the knightly owls of Ga'Hoole and help them fight the army created by St. Aegolius Academy.

Legend of the Guardians boasts an exciting cast, including Sam Neill (*Jurassic Park*), Geoffrey Rush (the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, *House on Haunted Hill*), Helen Mirren (*Inkheart*, *The Queen*, TV's *Prime Suspect*), and Hugo Weaving (the *Matrix* series). But the biggest surprise is the film's director: Zack Snyder, who made his feature film debut with the blockbuster *300*, followed by *Watchmen*. Snyder is a director known for his clear vision during the filmmaking process, which is key to making successful movies. *Legend of the Guardians* has all the ingredients to become one of the most successful animated movies of 2010.

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REBEL

Tiffany Prothero:

The Magic Is in the Details

by Karen Haber

Artist Tiffany Prothero's work has been getting a lot of attention from Realms of Fantasy readers lately. Her lyrical illustrations for stories by Richard Parks, filled with intriguing detail, powerful color relationships, and enticing composition, have made her an artist to watch.

Her work is marked by a detailed yet physically expressive style, intense use of color, bold composition, and an intriguing use of symbolism, frequently melding the real and surreal in a perfect blend for fantasy illustration. The artist often uses deep, rich, saturated color.

Painting fantasy art is a particular pleasure for her. "I like the content," she says. "I like making an image that really expresses the story in a symbolic way rather than doing a straight-up literal image."

The underlying strength of her images is the result of excellent, varied linework. Despite the popularity of digital tools, she relies on her hand skills to do the work. Her favored mediums are gouache, oil, Japanese ink, and pencil.

"I really like drawing and painting tight, adding lots of details and fine lines," she says. "Occasionally I try to loosen it up and get more painterly, but I always seem to come back to tight imagery.

"I can get lost in the detail work, using short watercolor brushes, just painting for hours."

"I started out doing oil for illustration, which I still love, but I'm really getting into gouache and I think I like it even better. Gouache is easier to reproduce because the colors are matte. And I can get tight and really graphic with it, which I can't do with oils.

"I can get lost in the detail work, using short watercolor brushes, just painting for hours. I really like constructing things, understanding anatomy and how animals move. Initially I considered graphic design as a career and took some drawing classes. That hooked me.

"I've always drawn, ever since I was a little kid. You might say I was obsessed with drawing as a kid. When I wasn't drawing I was daydreaming. So going to art school seemed a natural progression for me. As for fantasy art, well, I'd been a reader. What kid doesn't like The Hobbit? And I thought Bunnicula was awesome. These are such fun books. I also loved Brian Froud's The World of the Dark Crystal."

Among Tiffany's inspirations are the work of Golden Age artists Dean Cornwell, John William Waterhouse, N. C. Wyeth, Edwin Austin Abbey, Claire Wendling, Alexander Munro, and J. C. Leyendecker. But she also loves more contemporary artists and

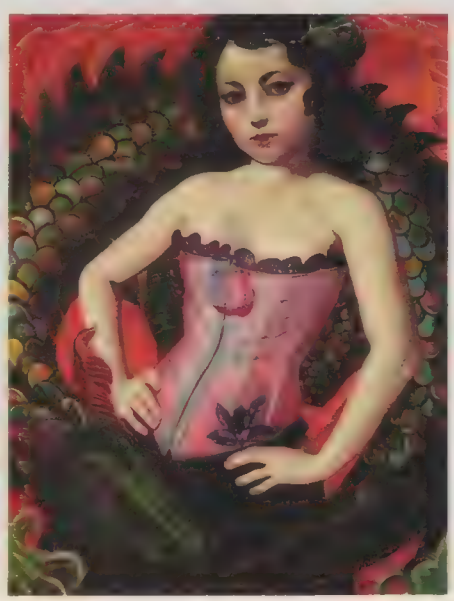
includes Jeffrey Jones and Jon Foster in her artists' hall of fame.

Animals, especially foxes, figure prominently in much of her work, and no wonder: she loves drawing them. She also loves animals when she's away from the easel: she feeds feral cats, and even tolerated a nocturnal visit from a raccoon one evening when she left her door open for her cat. The raccoon left a souvenir: a paw print that Tiffany has preserved on one of her sketchbook covers.

"My favorite subjects are animals, and mythology—especially Japanese mythology—involving transformation, people turning into animals, or vice versa," Tiffany says. "So the stories that Realms of Fantasy asked me to illustrate were a really good match for me. In 'A Touch of Hell' by Richard Parks, I decided that symbolism was the best way to go. The story is about a woman who becomes an ogre after she is murdered, and gets revenge on her husband. Really enjoyed it.

"And for the other Parks story I illustrated, 'On the Banks of the River of Heaven,' it was a story about yearning, and, again, Asian mythology was a key to the image."

Her approach to illustration is thorough and deep. "I love reading the story first so I can get an image in my head. I have to get to know the characters on a personal level. Then I let the idea come to me rather than force it. I like to have the story kind of soak in. When I have a few ideas I begin to sketch them. One will usually stand out, and I'll start to flesh it out. Next I'll look for references or make my own. Those might include photos of myself or my boyfriend, or another friend. Then I'll usually print out the sketch and paste it on masonite, do color study in Photoshop, then do the finished painting. I used to paint oil on masonite. Now it's gouache on illustration board which I prime first. I like to avoid boredom by varying techniques, exploring different styles."



Tiffany graduated from San Francisco's Academy of Art University with an emphasis in book cover illustration and then moved to New York to pick up additional skills and make connections in the business world. She has been a freelance illustrator for nearly

five years, and recently returned to live in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"Moving to New York was the best educational move I could have made. I got the best education there. Going to the Society of Illustrators for the first time was an extraordinary experience for me. Just seeing the actual paintings that I fell in love with in school, the way they really look, seeing the work of people like Greg Manchess, and learning from their process, helped me to make a big jump in my skills."

In addition to Realms of Fantasy, her work has appeared in Spectrum 14, and for Dover Publications, Stone Arch Books, and Aspirations Media, Inc. Among the books Tiffany has illustrated are Let's Go Green!: An Earth-Friendly Coloring Book (Dover Publications, 2009), The Mummy at Midnight by Steve Brezenoff (Stone Arch Books, 2008), and Curtains!: A High School Musical Mystery by Michael Dahl (Stone Arch Books, 2008). She was recently profiled in a Tor.com feature: www.tor.com/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=gallery&id=355.

To see more of Tiffany's work, visit her site: tiffanyprothero.com; and her blog: tiffanyprothero.blogspot.com.

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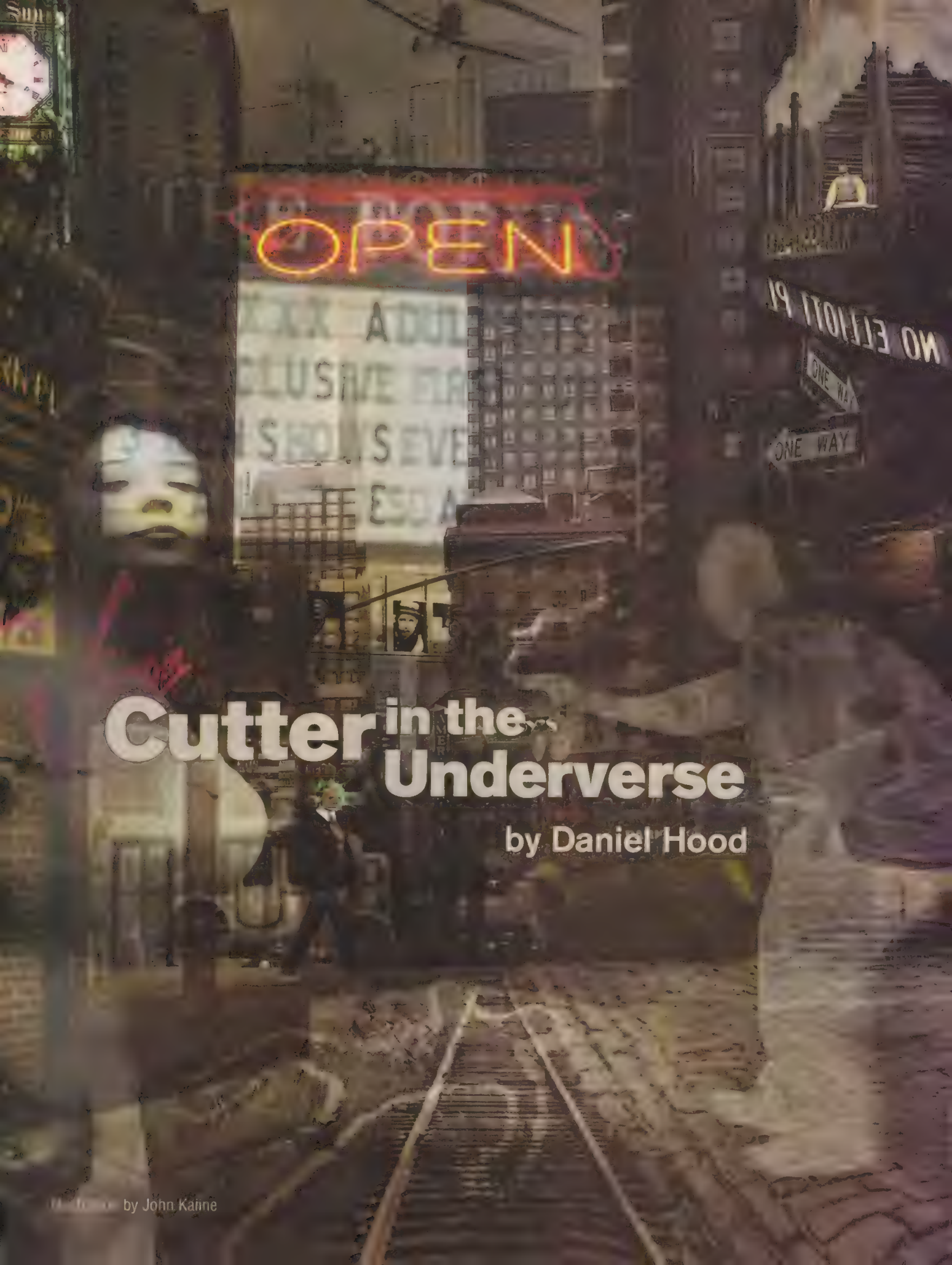

Cutter in the Underverse

by Daniel Hood

by John Kaine

Late Friday afternoon, Cutter found out he had a gambler's problem. It was his bookie on Staten Island who told him.

"Not a *gambling* problem, Detective," explained Paulie, who was always formal, since he valued his relationship with New York's Finest. "A *gambler's* problem. Someone's buying up your markers."

It was raining, and the phone booth on Chambers Street where Cutter had gone to answer Paulie's page was too small for his wide shoulders—the little shell seemed designed only to keep the phone dry. He pressed as far into its shelter as he could. "Who?"

Paulie didn't know. "They got pull, though. They're not really giving anyone a choice, if you know what I mean. I shouldn't even be telling you." As if he expected thanks.

Cutter shrugged. "I guess I'll hear from them soon enough. See you, Paulie."

He hung up, dug out some quarters, made three more calls in the rain. When he went back into the bar, his jacket was soaked, but he hardly noticed.

All his markers had been picked up—Paulie's, the two accounts in Brooklyn, even the little one he kept with Sonny Shine's widow out on Long Island. Clasping his hands around a sweating beer, Cutter wondered why, and who, and how serious it was.

Between a couple of bad tips on the ponies and the Yankees' late-season slump, he was more than a little overextended. Nothing disastrous, with his action spread around, but he couldn't cover it all at once. And that had to be the point, right? Someone wanted to call in all his debts, knowing he couldn't cover them.

Then there'd be a squeeze.

He just had to wait for it.

While he waited, he drank another beer and tried to figure the angle. His bookies hadn't given him any details about who applied the pressure, but that didn't matter, and it wouldn't tell him anything about what he'd be asked for. At Paulie's and Mrs. Shine's level, it would have been pawns on the phone, connections of connections, favors called in from distant parts. Their calls might have come from Little Italy or Little Odessa or Chinatown, but no one there had a personal interest in a middle-aged cop on permanent detachment, and there was nothing he could do for them.

His call wouldn't come from any place an investigator from Internal Affairs would recognize. His call would come from the Underverse. And that meant that there was no real point trying to figure out the angle, since the angle could be anything.

His call would come from the Underverse. And that meant that there was no real point trying to figure out the angle, since the angle could be anything.

While he drank his third beer, two cops came in. Cutter knew one of them slightly.

"Hey, old-timer!" said the one he knew, and dragged his partner down the bar with a smirk that suggested they could have some fun. "Jorge, this is Pat Cutter."

"'Carton' Cutter?" Jorge asked. He was young, and didn't yet know that the nickname was more joke than compliment. "The Missing Persons guy?"

If other policemen knew Cutter, they knew him for finding people, mostly children. That was where the nickname came from—a crack about how he didn't work with case files, just a collection of milk cartons with pictures of missing kids on them. It wasn't the only thing he did, not by a long shot, but it was the only thing other cops were allowed to know about.

"Yeah, that's me," he allowed, but the older cop shook his head.

"Hold on! Carton's not with Missing Persons. How's things at Miscellaneous Events, Carton?"

Young Jorge looked puzzled. "Miscellaneous Events? What's that, like public relations?"

The older cop cracked up. Cutter shrugged; he had long since stopped caring what the rest of the PD thought of him, but he still wondered why jackasses like this were allowed to walk the streets with their faces intact.

"Something like that," he told Jorge, and then, mercifully, his pager sounded. "Got to go, boys."

On Chambers again, with the rain still coming down, Cutter stopped under the awning of a Chinese deli and checked his message. The display read CIR 3317 - AR.

As if that didn't tell him everything he needed to know, when he looked up the block for a phone booth, he spotted one—a real one, a fully enclosed booth with a folding door and a tiny seat wedged in the corner. The brushed steel and glass glimmered in the rain.

He stepped in, closed the door behind him, dropped a dime. The operator came on, a woman's nasal voice.

"Give me Circle-3317."

"Right away, sir."

The last good phone booths in New York had been replaced sometime in the late '80s, and the old-fashioned phone numbers had gone out of style decades before that. The only places things like that hung on—things like polite telephone operators—was in black-and-white movies and the Underverse.

The line crackled, and a man picked up.

"Lindy's."

"I'm looking for A. R."

"Who's this?"

"He paged me."

"Must be Detective Cutter, then!"

"Look, he called me. Is he there?"

"Yup, and so should you be."

Cutter closed his eyes, rubbed his forehead. "Where?"

"Lindy's, where else?" After a beat, the man on the other end added, "The old Lindy's."

"There's a new one?"

He hung up before the man could answer, and headed west for the subway. At the top of the stairs he looked back, but the phone booth was gone. No one noticed the dry square on the sidewalk where it had stood, and the rain soon soaked it dark.

An express train got him to Times Square ahead of the rain, or behind it. It was hard to tell, because as he climbed out of the subway he was deep in the Underverse, its shimmer and mist all around him.

A confusion of overlapping images, like double- and triple-exposures: the Virgin Megastore overlaid with the ghosts of a row of porno theaters, a grimy arcade flickering through the front of the MTV studios, an elegant Moorish theater visible in the mirrored glass of the Marriott Marquis—not a reflection from across the street, but from the past. On the streets, among the tour buses and taxis and SUVs, the shadows of horse-drawn omnibuses, Model Ts, Checker cabs; on the sidewalks, among the tourists with their fanny packs and logo ball caps, walked gentlemen in derbies and tall beaver hats, head-shawled pushcart grannies and Gibson girls.

Cutter had been here before, seen it all. The trick was not to focus, to let the reflections and echoes of the past go unexamined. There was a glamour in them, an allure that could drag you down. He shouldered north through the crowd from 42nd, treating the ghostly just the same as the real, ignoring them both.

There were experts at Miscellaneous Events who could tell him where the old Lindy's had been, on which block and for what years, as well as what had been there before, and before that, back through the years when Times Square had been Longacre Square, and when Longacre Square had been farms, and when the farms had been wilderness around an Indian trail. Cutter didn't know much about that; he'd been born and raised in Manhattan, and knowing what came before never really interested him. That was why the Office had researchers, most of whom had moved to the city as adults, and then spent their time reading how it had been before they got there.

If he'd been on official business, he could have called them, and suffered a long history lesson before they coughed up an address. But this was unofficial—how unofficial, he would have to see—and anyway he'd grown up in Hell's Kitchen, and his grandfather used to talk about Lindy's, the cheesecake.

After a block or two he spotted a sign, fat white Deco letters spelling the name, but he knew it was the wrong one. It looked too solid, and he could see tourists in the windows with green foam Lady Liberty crowns on their heads. He walked on, ghosts and history in the corners of his eyes.

They'd lost a researcher in the Underverse once, so entranced he wouldn't leave, and now he was part of it, all wide eyes and gaping mouth, the archetype of an awestruck hick.

The old Lindy's was farther than he thought, all the way out of Times Square in the Fifties, but long before he got there, he could tell he was on the right track. The Underverse was like that: what you went looking for usually found you.

He looked the place over from across the street, allowing himself to focus now. The window display made the place look more like a deli or caterer's than a restaurant, but otherwise there was nothing special about it—apart from the nostalgic allure that everything possessed in the Underverse, the magic of black-and-white, the glamour of sepia. Cutter had been in the shimmer all over Manhattan, and that magic made everything look special, even the tenements down in Five Points, the Hooverville in Central Park, the abattoirs and butchers' yards that flickered all around the U.N. They'd lost a researcher in the Underverse once, so entranced he wouldn't leave, and now he was part of it, all wide eyes and gaping mouth, the archetype of an awestruck hick. There was nothing they could do for him. Now none of the researchers were allowed to venture in; they left it to Cutter, who didn't seem to feel its pull as strongly.

He crossed Broadway and went in.

Straight out of a thousand museum photos, a cashier by the door: hair parted in the middle and Brylcreemed flat, a high-collared shirt with a short, fat tie under a long white apron.

"I'm looking for A. R.," Cutter said.

"Mr. Rothstein's at his table." The man flicked his eyes toward the back of the restaurant.

Cutter took the name past the other booths, where the customers were almost transparent, their conversations almost silent, as if the sound had been turned down on them. He knew the booth he wanted—the one at the rear, with the two Bogart-style gunsels by it. They had more weight than anyone else in the place, more gravity; their corner of the restaurant looked like a good crime scene photo, sharp-edged and well-lit, while the rest was washed out, the diners just window-dressing, caught forever in this eddy of the Underverse.

One of the gunsels stepped up, hands out in warning as Cutter approached.

"Whoa, pally! What do you want?"

"I've got an appointment."

"Let him through," said the man who sat alone in the last booth.

Unhappy, fingers itching, the gunsel stood aside, and Cutter slid in opposite the man who had spoken. He was slight, in a well-cut charcoal suit, the lapels large and his tie pattern loud enough to be fashionable in another era. His hairline receded and the edges of his face were doughy, but the features clustered at the center were sharp and small, a lean man's nose and slitted eyes and lips too small, so when

he smiled, as he did just then, they thinned and didn't quite close over his teeth. It was a painful smile, but Cutter got the impression it was the best the man could do.

"Detective! Thanks for coming! You want something?" Cutter shook his head, and Rothstein nodded, his lips relaxing to thin lines. "Do I need to introduce myself?"

"I know enough. You fixed the Series, right?" In fact, that was all he knew, and it was only a fleeting memory from a movie, dredged up during the walk from the cashier's stand to the booth.

Rothstein laughed, his lips twisting. "Amazing, the things a man gets remembered for. I did a lot, an awful lot, but what stands out is the one thing I didn't do. Because I tell you, Detective—as I told your colleagues a long while back—I had nothing to do with that. Why, I lost money on those games!"

And then he winked, and smiled his pained smile again.

Cutter shrugged, wondering. Few in the Underverse understood that time had passed—that *they* were past.

"Of course, that might stick out special for you," Rothstein went on. "After all, you're a sporting man, aren't you?"

They were coming to the point. Cutter waited.

"The nags have let you down lately, haven't they?"

"It wasn't the nags that let me down."

Rothstein chuckled at that. "Yeah, the horses are the only honest people in racing. You get out to the track a lot?"

"Not in a while." His memories of race tracks were all on TV screens; he couldn't remember if he had ever gone, and he couldn't tell if Rothstein was playing with him.

"Now that's a shame. You should go. I went to Belmont a couple of times—you have Aqueduct now, but in my day Belmont was it. And boy, it was swell. All the society types dressed up, and the rich girls in furs. It was real exclusive, you know. But the sun shines on everybody, doesn't it? And the horses don't care who's in the stands, right? Boy, it was swell."

He made a face, as if caught in an indiscretion, and wiped it all away with a sideways gesture. "Okay, Cutter. So your horses haven't been so hot lately. And the Bombers have let you down. And I hold your markers. You know what that means, right? Here?"

"Yeah." The researchers at Miscellaneous Events argued endlessly about reification and cultural mythography and symbolic logic, but Cutter knew the important thing: things that meant nothing in the real world—promises, intentions, the past—meant something in the Underverse. An oath of vengeance sworn in a hot moment could trap a person there forever, and holding a man's marker gave you a hold on the man himself. "And you know I can't pay it right now. So what do you want?"

"I want you to find a fellow for me." A man who fixed a World Series would only be after one thing. "How much does he owe you?"

"I want you to find a fellow for me."

A man who fixed a World Series would only be after one thing. "How much does he owe you?"

Rothstein shook his head, smiling his pained smile. "It's not like that. I owe him. And I mean to pay."

Time ran strange in the Underverse—fast, slow, sometimes normal, but never the same from one visit to the next—so Cutter wasn't surprised to find it was almost eight o'clock when he walked out of the old Lindy's. Fresh rain shined the streets, but the glimmer was gone from Broadway, and he didn't need to look behind him to know the restaurant wasn't there anymore.

He caught a cab home to his one-bedroom on Second Avenue, kicking the thing around in his head. There were people he could call for money, but he wasn't sure he had to. He had an idea, and he wanted to know more. The researchers could have answered all his questions in a flash, but he'd have to say why, and they'd tell the witches who ran the Office. Instead, he called an editor he knew on the *Daily News*, an old-timer who liked odd angles, and thought Cutter was full of them. The guy was out of the office, so Cutter reached him on his cell, taking in a fire in the Bronx.

"Bob, what do you know about Arnold Rothstein?"

"The guy who fixed the Series in 1919?" Sirens screamed through the phone, died away. "He was the big man in the Teens and '20s. Big gambler and bootlegger, and they say he was the first guy to bring heroin into the country. But mostly he was a gambler—ran book, a couple of houses, a big spread in Long Island and even one in Saratoga—always with the fix in. A real criminal genius. He taught Luciano and Lansky. They used to call him 'the Big Brain,' or 'the Big Bankroll,' and he's in *The Great Gatsby* and *Guys and Dolls*. What else?"

"What about a guy named George McManus?"

Bob laughed. "That's the guy who killed him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. McManus was a little fish, but he got Rothstein to come to this card game he's running. It goes on for a couple of days, Rothstein loses big—one, two hundred thousand, something like that. He leaves IOUs, but later he tells himself they must have cheated him, so he refuses to pay. McManus was running the game, so it's his problem, and he starts going crazy because Rothstein is the big man, right? So finally he gets Rothstein to meet him at some hotel, and the story goes that Rothstein gave his gun to one of his guys beforehand, and says, 'I won't be needing this.' And he goes to the meeting and McManus shoots him."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Rothstein staggers into the service stairs and a cop finds him, but he won't say anything. He lasts two days, but he never says what happened. The cops picked McManus up later on, but he got off. Politics—Rothstein wasn't popular in some circles. One of the guys in the Queens bureau told me McManus lived there for the rest of his life, up until the '70s or something, and the story was that every once in a while he'd get drunk and talk about being the guy who killed Rothstein. How it was an accident. He'd been drinking, and just meant to threaten him."

Cutter thought about that until Bob asked, "Why you want to know?"

"Background," Cutter said. "Can you find out where the hotel was, and where McManus got picked up?"

"Geez, man, it's going to be a late night. The Bronx is burning."

"Tomorrow's fine."

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STRIPPED DOWN TO HIS SHORTS, Cutter lay in bed, one arm up behind his head. He lay still—the bed was a single, too small for him to toss and turn his bulk—and kicked around his idea.

Regular people didn't live in the Underverse. They wandered in, or were lured or kidnapped, and sometimes the witches at the Office sent him to get them. But if they stayed long enough, they weren't people anymore, because there were only two kinds of permanent residents: ghosts and monsters.

The monsters—well, the researchers argued about them, too, whether they were projections of the collective unconscious, or the warped remnants of powerful psychopathic personalities, or demons drawing life from the evil that flourished in the city's dark corners. Whatever they were, Cutter had faced enough of them to know Rothstein wasn't a monster.

So he was a ghost, trapped like all of them by some compelling urge or overwhelming emotion. Most ghosts, though, didn't get it; the trap was permanent for them, because they couldn't see it was a trap. They thought it was just their life, and so they lived it over and over again, a closed loop of obsession or paranoia, fear or doomed love. They littered the Underverse, thousands upon thousands of frustrated lives trapped in glimmering sepia, and Cutter had long since stopped paying them any attention.

Rothstein was different.

For one thing, he saw past the trap—he understood where he was, and that his time was past, and he had been able to reach out from the Underverse to tap Cutter. All of which would make him dangerous, almost a monster, except for his purpose.

He wanted out.

You didn't see that in the Underverse. Cutter had never seen it. The monsters reveled in the glimmer, and the ghosts just wallowed there, while half of the people he rescued from the place had to be torn away, and the other half were too confused to recognize the danger they'd escaped, thinking only that they'd awoken from a strange dream. He came to learn that early on, and the thrill of it died away. The Underverse became just another bad neighborhood the locals were too stupid to move out of. He learned to start ignoring things.

Rothstein, though, he couldn't ignore, and not just because of the markers. Miscellaneous Events might have given him the money, if he'd explained the whole thing, but he didn't want that. He wanted to get Rothstein out. The man might not deserve to be saved, but he wanted it. And Cutter thought that maybe wanting it was halfway to deserving it, in the Underverse anyway.

That was his idea. He slept on it.

HIS MAN ON THE NEWS CALLED EARLY on Saturday, which wasn't a surprise. Bob couldn't resist a New York story; he'd probably come home from the fire and looked Rothstein up right away. The surprise was that Cutter was awake to take the call, shaved and showered with a cup of coffee from the deli down the block. He stood at the empty counter in his kitchen and wrote down the details in his notebook.

"Rothstein was shot in the Park Central Hotel," Bob said, and gave an address in the fifties, on Seventh. "Room 349. McManus holed up in a place on the Mosholu Parkway, but when he was ready to come in the cops got a tip that he'd be in a barbershop on 242nd and Broadway."

Cutter underlined the address, and understood why Rothstein needed him. It was in the Bronx.

"He came in because he knew it was all fixed," Bob went on, though Cutter only half-listened. "One of the big borough bosses took care of it. Check this out—the judge knew what day the trial would end, before it even started. Here's my favorite thing, though. You know what McManus's nickname was? Hump. Hump McManus. How do you get a name like that?"

Cutter said he didn't know.

MISCELLANEOUS EVENTS PROVIDED him with a car, an unmarked sedan that sat in a garage most of the time. He picked it up and took the West Side Highway north, the Hudson wide and shining on his left, and crossed Spuyten

Duyvil on the Henry Hudson Bridge. The day was clear and bright, Inwood Hill Park and the Palisades basking green in the sun, the water winking at him from far below.

Cutter noted the water, and little else. It penned in the ghosts and monsters; they found it almost impossible to cross, and if they tried, more often than not the running water just washed them away. The deep thinkers at the Office fought over why that should be so, when they should really just be grateful that it was.

Neither Rothstein nor his gunsel-ghosts could leave Manhattan to bring McManus in, but Cutter could. And if he did it right, then Rothstein could leave in a different way, for good. He found himself putting his foot down, speeding too fast on the tight curves of the parkway. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been impatient for something.

When he pulled off the parkway onto the local streets, he couldn't see any glimmer, but he knew the Underverse was sparse in the outlying boroughs. They didn't have Manhattan's history, its density; there were huge stretches of the Bronx and Queens where the weight of men's misery hadn't lain heavy enough, hadn't sunk deep enough, to make a glimmer, and Staten Island only had three isolated spots that he knew of. So there was no mistaking the barbershop, with the big Packard at the curb out front, grainy as a tabloid photo. Cutter double-parked and went in.

The barbershop smelled of steam and soap and aftershave, and everything was nickel-plated. The way Bob told it, McManus was waiting for the detective who picked him up, cracking wise and without a care in the world, but the big guy hunched in the chair against the wall didn't seem cheerful. He was dressed sharp, his suit the same style as Rothstein's, his cheeks glowed from a recent shave and his hair was perfectly parted and slicked back, but his eyes were wide and haunted when he looked up at Cutter.

"You here to take me downtown?"

"Not all the way. A man wants to see you. About that debt he owes you."

McManus gave a hollow laugh, then got to his feet, brushed down his trouser legs. "Yeah. Time to pay up, right?"

"That's what he says."

"All right. Give me a minute, will you?"

Cutter shrugged. This was the easy part. In life, McManus had gone downtown of his own free will, so he was likely to do the same in the Underverse, where ghosts usually stuck to patterns. As the guy collected himself—he stood with his head down, one hand thrust into his pocket and the other cupped under his chin—Cutter almost felt sorry for him. Rothstein had Lindy's and his gunsels for eternity, with all of Broadway out the window, while McManus had only an empty barbershop in the Bronx. As for why he was stuck in the barbershop, and not, say, the Park Central, Cutter figured it out by watching his bleak face, and the way he muttered to himself.

The witches had put charms in the car—a macandal in the glove compartment, vevers painted on the steel under the floor mats...

This is where he figured it out, Cutter thought. How he was trapped. The biggest thing he ever did in his life—killing the most important man in New York—and he couldn't do anything with it except deny it. He couldn't take it back, and he couldn't explain that it was an accident, and he couldn't brag about it. No making it right, no forgiveness, no glory, just a drunken nobody telling stories in a bar in Queens.

Cutter almost felt sorry for him, but he had pulled the trigger, and anyway, if things worked out, the debt would be paid and McManus could get out the same way Rothstein did. That diminished his sympathy, and he was about to say something when McManus sniffed, lifted his head, and tried a grin. "Time to go, huh?" He grabbed his hat from the rack.

"Yeah."

"YOU'VE MADE THIS TRIP BEFORE, right?" Cutter asked, when they were in the sedan.

Looking out the window, McManus nodded. "Lots of times."

"So you know it's no big deal, right?"

"Right." He ran a hand over his mouth. "No big deal."

The witches had put charms in the car—a *macandal* in the glove compartment, *vevers* painted on the steel under the floor mats—a web of spells mostly for protection, but since the magic partook of the nature of the Underverse, it had the added bonus of feeling like part of the glimmer to those who lived there. It helped sometimes to ease lost civilians back into the real world, made the transition easier. Cutter thought of it as methadone for glimmer addicts, and hoped it would get McManus across the water.

"We're just headed downtown," he said, as he pulled onto the parkway. "You've gone downtown before. You're supposed to go downtown."

McManus watched Riverdale go by, his voice distant, entranced. "I'm always supposed to go downtown."

"Right. Right. Just stay with me."

As they approached the bridge, out of the corner of his eye he could see McManus go rigid. He drove faster, hoping to gun it across the water, but even as they shot onto the span he could see the cars backed up at the tollbooths on the far end.

McManus drew in a sharp breath and twisted in his seat to face west, where Spuyten Duyvil met the broad sweep of the Hudson. He pressed a hand to the window, the fingers already thinning to transparency.

"Don't look at the water," Cutter ordered. "Stay with me! Hey!"

They pulled up at the end of the shortest lane, still out over the water, and McManus jerked back from the window, his mouth open in a soundless moan. He was thinning, the water below draining the glimmer from him.

The cars inched forward.

"McManus, hey! Listen to me! We're going to the Park Central to get your money."

The ghost's head lolled back. Cutter could see New Jersey through his suit.

"You hear me? You've got to see Rothstein. He's going to pay you."

A shadow now, McManus covered his eyes with the palms of his hands and began to shake silently. Cutter thought he was sobbing as they rolled onto Manhattan, but when the E-ZPass light on the tollbooth turned green and McManus began to get solid, he understood that the ghost was laughing.

Back on the island, with a ghost at his side, Cutter was deep into the glimmer. He flash-glimpsed a monster hiding beneath the embankment archways at the back of Riverside Park—a pale, multi-jointed thing, clinging to the shadows and waiting for sunset—and the West Side was all double- and triple-exposures, railyards and belching factories beneath Trump palaces, tenements lurking behind glass towers. Sam Brown-belted traffic cops blew whistles at the intersections when he left the highway and headed into midtown, hot corn girls cried out, Packards and Reos like armored beetles blew past him with the muzzles of Tommy guns poking from their windows.

He paid no attention.

McManus was better by the time they pulled up in front of the Park Central, solid. He put his hand on the door and looked over at Cutter.

"The usual room?"

Cutter nodded.

"Yeah." McManus nodded too, his lips pursed a little. "Wouldn't want to change anything."

The ghost led the way into the hotel, and the glimmer was so strong Cutter couldn't even tell what building occupied the space in the real world, whether office tower or apartments. For the moment, the hotel felt more real, and McManus, in his jazzy suit and snap brim, waving off a monkey-capped bellboy and striding up to the front desk, belonged there more than Cutter, hanging back in his off-the-rack blazer and Dockers, letting the ghost make the arrangements.

Room 349 was available, of course, and Cutter didn't object when McManus asked the desk clerk to send up a bottle and some ice.

"Just don't drink too much," he said, as another monkey-cap took them up in the elevator.

"I can't drink too much," McManus said. "There ain't enough in the world."

But he started in as soon as the bottle arrived, breaking the seal and pouring out a belt while Cutter looked around. It was a room, nothing special, nothing hidden, and no surprises, except that he had never thought what a hotel room would look like without a TV. McManus looked at home, drink in hand, feet up.

He flash-glimpsed a monster hiding beneath the embankment archways at the back of Riverside Park—a pale, multi-jointed thing, clinging to the shadows and waiting for sunset...

"You'll wait?" Cutter asked.

"It's all I ever do," McManus told his drink.

That was the story with a lot of ghosts, and Cutter wasn't all that interested. He turned to the door, but McManus called him back.

"Why are you helping him?"

Cutter started to say something, then stopped. "He's got my markers."

McManus laughed his hollow laugh. "And you're working them off. Nice to know some people pay their debts. Of course, everybody pays him."

Cutter frowned and crossed the room, held out his hand. "You still have it?"

McManus looked up at him. "You going to brace me?"

"You going to shoot him again?"

"Nah, I'm done with that." He fished around in his jacket pocket, came up with a revolver. "Still, don't want any accidents."

Cutter took the gun. It was a small piece, but heavy, and when he broke it he saw it was loaded. He slipped it into his own pocket.

"You know, I didn't mean to do it," McManus said.

"I know."

"It was an accident."

"I know." He itched to get to Lindy's. "Rothstein wants out. Out of this." His nod took in the room, and all of New York.

"Don't we all?" McManus looked away. "Go tell him I'm here."

Out in the street, away from McManus's gloom, Cutter felt better. McManus was just a ghost, stuck in the loop he'd made when he got drunk and shot a bigger man than himself. He didn't get that this was a new thing—a big thing.

Rothstein knew it; when he waved Cutter over to his booth at Lindy's, his purse-mouth grin looked almost natural. "You got him?"

"He's at the hotel."

"Okay, Cutter! I got a bag here somewhere."

One of the gunsels hefted a black medical bag onto the table. Rothstein unsnapped the latch and accordioned it open to show the cash nested inside. Cutter nodded.

"That's it?" Rothstein laughed, and the gunsel took the bag away. "That's over three hundred grand, Detective. You ought to show more respect. You want a drink? Let's have a drink!"

"He's waiting."

"So let him wait!" But he was grinning, in a good mood. He knew it was something new too. "All right, all right. Let's go."

They got up, and the gunsel met them by the cashier's stand with the bag. Rothstein took it, and winked at Cut-

ter. "Almost forgot!" He reached into the breast of his suit, came out with a little pearl-handled revolver, handed it to his bodyguard. "Keep this for me. I won't be back."

High-spirited, he whistled at women as they walked over to the Park Central, and kept up a line of chatter directed at Cutter.

"What a day! This is glorious, ain't it? You got to get out more, Detective. You work too hard, I can tell."

Cutter said nothing. He hadn't noticed before, but it was a nice day.

"You don't talk much, but that's all right. I like you. I'm going to do you a favor. A horse in the last race at Aqueduct today. A sure thing." He named it, and made Cutter repeat the name. "A sure thing. But you got to go watch it at the track. It's a good day for it. Promise you'll go to the track."

"Why?"

"Why not? It's something new." His eyes narrowed, looking shrewd and playful. "I bet you don't see too much that's new, do you? Plenty that's old, but not much new." When Cutter didn't respond, he lost the look and took a deep breath through his nose. "It's a good day to get clear. I've been trying to pay this guy back for years. Stuck in a rut, that's what it is. But I feel good about today. I think it'll work. I think I'll get clear. Say, what do you think it'll be like, after?"

Cutter shrugged, still wondering about Rothstein's guess, and the way it chimed with what he had been thinking. He didn't know what would come after; he'd never known a ghost to break out. The whole reason people got stuck in the Underverse was because they were the kind who couldn't break out. They did what they always did.

Cutter knew that.

"Heya, Hump! What's the word?"

They found McManus pacing in a cloud of cigarette smoke, his face strained and cold.

"I got something for you," Rothstein said, dangling his black bag, but McManus ignored his good cheer.

"Let's just get it done," he said.

"Always in a hurry." Rothstein put the bag on the bed, and unsnapped the latch. "I've been waiting a long time to pay you back, Hump, and you never want to let me enjoy it."

Splitting the top of the bag, Rothstein dipped his hand in. Cutter saw McManus square his shoulders, and thought about the gunsel meeting them at the door with the bag. Cutter had his hand in his coat pocket when Rothstein came up with a gun—a slim little automatic—and shot McManus twice, the sound bigger than the gun, and when Rothstein turned on him he had McManus's revolver ready and shot Rothstein in the stomach.

"How many times has he done this?" "I don't know," McManus said. "It seems like forever."

The automatic dropped to the floor, and in the smoke and thunderous echo of gunshots Cutter went for it, grabbed it up, saw Rothstein bounce against the doorjamb and out into the hall, and went around the bed to McManus, lying on the floor by the window.

Wisps of smoke rose up from the holes in his suit, but there was no blood, and his face was stiff and composed. Cutter knelt beside him, seeing the glimmer already beginning to drain away.

"How many times has he done this?"

"I don't know," McManus said. "It seems like forever."

He went fast, fading out—gone back to the Bronx, Cutter figured, to wait for the next time Rothstein got hold of someone who could make the trip.

The bag was gone from the bed, but the hotel was still there, and when he went out into the hallway he spotted Rothstein down the corridor, holding his gut with one hand and pushing himself along the wall with the other.

Cutter caught up with him, grabbed his elbow.

"I thought you were going to try something new."

Rothstein grimaced, then grinned. "I was. I was going to kill you, too. I never did that before."

Shaking his head, Cutter hustled Rothstein down the hall to the entrance to the service stairs, ignoring his groans. He pushed open the door and shoved the ghost through.

"Next time," he said as the door closed, "why don't you just pay the man."

Out in the street and out of the glimmer, the sedan had a ticket on the windshield. Cutter threw it away and got in. He sat behind the wheel for a while, wondering where to go. He thought about going to the Bronx again, to the barbershop, and on the way back just stopping on the bridge until McManus disappeared, but he didn't know if that would be a mercy to him, or if it would even work, if it would take him out of the loop. He thought about heading up to Miscellaneous Events and asking the witches—at some point he would have to tell them what Rothstein had been doing all these years—but he wanted to think about it some more before he did.

Anyway, it would all keep. The Underverse wasn't going anywhere.

In the end, he thought about Rothstein's tip on the last race. It was too soon to call one of his bookies; his slate was clean, but they'd still be worried about whoever had bought up his markers. There was an OTB only a couple of blocks away, but even as he thought of it he discarded the idea. He'd never been to Aqueduct, and it was a beautiful afternoon.

The horse lost—it didn't even place—but driving back to Manhattan Cutter thought that it had been good to see something new. ❧

By day, Dan Hood is the managing editor of a trade magazine. By night and on weekends, he's written five novels, and one guidebook to New York City, the research for which inspired this story.

MIDDLE
by Eilis O'Neal

On the fifth day after Addy falls asleep, I start selling tickets. You wouldn't think that people would pay to see someone sleeping, but I don't have trouble finding customers. Mostly, I guess, because my sister is beautiful. Not just normal pretty like Mara Highfield, who's a senior like Addy and gets asked out every weekend, but turn-when-she-walks-by, jaw-dropping gorgeous. So all the neighborhood boys want to see Addy in her nightgown. Also, the tickets are cheap: $2.00 apiece. And you can see her dreams.

The ticket thing lasts for about two days, with customers meeting me in the empty lot two blocks down, the one where they're supposed to build a new curry restaurant. Except that they keep having trouble with the ghost of the owner of the building that used to be there, the one they tore down to build the curry place, even though it was her son who sold the land. Nothing but one wall's been built, so we meet there (no more than three people at a time, to keep Mom from noticing). I take the money and then lead them to the back door of our house and sneak them up the stairs to Addy's room.

Like I said, you can see her dreams. They sort of hover near the ceiling. Sometimes they make sense, but mostly they're just weird—girls with wings standing on diving boards, clocks with faces where the numbers should be, mountains made out of purple ice. The dreams change pretty quickly. Most disappear or just morph into the next one, but sometimes one will get scrunched up in the corner of the ceiling and linger for a few days. Sometimes I see Mom or Dad, or Jake, or even myself, but usually just for a minute or two. Once, I saw Addy kissing Marcus Deramo by a lake with mermaids singing in it, but not when I was conducting a tour.

On the third day that I've been selling tickets—the eighth since she's been asleep—Jake sees me bringing three fifth-graders up the stairs, and he runs right to Mom and tells. So I get grounded, and the tours have to stop. Mom tries to take the money I've made, but it's forty bucks, so I hide it in a shoebox in my closet, behind some dresses I never wear, and claim I returned it to the customers.

Afterward, I find Jake in the backyard, sitting by his vegetable garden with a copy of *Crime and Punishment*. "Thanks a lot, bird brain," I say.

Jake sniffs and pushes his glasses back up his sweaty nose. Jake's ten, but he's old. I mean, he's like a forty-year-old professor trapped in a midget's body. He's in fourth grade, even though the school wanted him to skip practically to high school, because Dad thinks he's better off with kids his own age. I was never so grateful as when Dad put his foot down over that. Can you imagine anything worse than being a freshman with your ten-year-old brother?

"I was making good money," I tell him. "I was gonna give you some of it."

He squints at me, trying to figure out if I'm lying or not. Jake's a genius, but he's not much with the common sense.

"Really," I say. "I was going to buy you a new frog." Jake has about thirty stuffed frogs, starting with the one our Aunt Mabel gave him when he was born.

"I don't need any more frogs," he says. "Clyde doesn't like them."

Clyde is Jake's new *thing*. His imaginary friend. Supposedly, he's a were-llama. I don't know whether that means he's a boy who turns into a llama, or a llama that turns into something else. Jake won't say.

I try to kick an acorn with my shoe, but I miss, and Jake snickers. "Well, tell Clyde he can stuff it. It'll kill Mom if you say that to her." Mom's the one who's gotten Jake most of his frogs.

He shakes his head. "I can't. He's busy."

"What's he doing?"

Jake shrugs. "Memorizing Pi. He's up to about 900 digits right now."

I think about going inside and talking to Mom, but I decide to take a walk instead. She's got enough problems right now, I guess. I mean, my sister's been asleep for eight days, flaunting her dreams, and apparently my bother's imaginary llama is about to get into Harvard. How can I compete with that?

We're having dinner when the doorbell rings. Dad has been telling us about the dog he saw at his office that day. It had just given birth to six puppies, and three of them had wings. Little ones, with speckled feathers. The owner didn't think she could sell the ones with wings, so she wanted to know if Dad could remove them. But Dad's part of a vet group that's against cosmetic surgery on animals—no ear-clipping, no tail-bobbing—and he said no. Then Mom chimes in about her day at the travel agency.

"This man called and said he wanted to take a trip to Germany," she says between bites of fettuccine. "So I asked him when. '1944,' he says. So I explain that we don't do war years. No Georgia in 1864, no France in 1789. Too much liability. But he didn't believe me. Wanted to speak to someone higher up. I tried to offer him a nice package to Harlem in the '20s, but he was adamant. So I had to pass him off to Sylvia, and she was on the phone with him for an hour."

Just then the doorbell rings. Jake scoots off his chair and runs for the door while Mom glares at me. "That had better not be someone wanting to gawk at your sister, Jenny. The doctor says she needs quiet if she's going to wake up."

A boy about my age follows Jake back into the dining room. He has brown hair that hangs down on his forehead, and he's wearing a faded Ramones shirt over black cargo pants. "My mom was wondering if she could borrow two eggs," he says.

"You moved into the Greens' house, right?" Dad says as Mom goes into the kitchen for the eggs. The boy shrugs. "What's your name?"

"Simon."

"Tell your mother we have a neighborhood plant society," Mom says, handing him the eggs. "We meet every other Tuesday."

Simon nods, then shuffles out.

After dinner, I walk down to the Greens' old house. Simon's standing outside, just past where the light from the porch ends, his hands in his pockets.

"Hey," I say. "You want to see my sister's dreams?"

SIMON'S FAMILY MOVED HERE FROM L.A. So he's used to things being a little wilder, especially at school. He was once in a knife fight in the hall, although it sounds like he mostly dodged until security guards arrived to break it up. There were so many kids there, he says, that he cut at least one class a day and no one ever noticed.

"Where'd you go?" I ask during the first class we cut at our school. I'd been walking to Mrs. Milinsky's freshman comp, and he raised an eyebrow at me from across the hall. A minute later, we were walking out the fire exit at the end of the science wing. Since he doesn't know the town yet, I led the way to the park a few blocks from the high school.

Simon raises his head questioningly from the picnic table. He's lying across the top of it, his feet hanging over the end.

"When you cut class in L.A.," I add.

He flops an arm over his eyes. "Different places. There was this Korean grocery store—a family ran it. The grandmother, she didn't know much English, but she could play this Korean recorder like crazy. She won prizes before they moved over here. She was teaching me, so sometimes I'd go there. Or sometimes I'd just walk around. A few times I went to another class, one where my friends were, or a girl I liked. The teachers didn't notice."

He shifts his arm to glance at me. "What about you? You ever cut class before?"

I think about lying and saying that yeah, I cut class every day. In fact, I barely know where the high school is, I cut class so much.

I shake my head.

Simon grins. His teeth are straight, except for one on the bottom row. It slants across the one beside it, just a little, like a picket fence that's gotten blown over. "Next time then, we'll do something more fun."

The next day, when Mrs. Milinsky asks where I'd been during class, I say I had a stomachache and went to the nurse's office. So the school never even calls my parents.

The next time, I think, I'll skip a class like Mr. Wolfridge's biology class. He's ex-military, a real hard-ass. He probably won't buy a story about a stomachache. So it'll be interesting, to see if I can make up a better one. And if I can't, he'll call my parents, and that'll be interesting, too.

JAKE HAS STARTED ACTING WEIRD. Weirder than usual, anyway. He makes a bunch of booby traps and puts them outside his door, so that we all keep having to avoid buckets of water and sticky places on the floor. Finally, I look at the calendar and see that the full moon is coming up.

"You worried that Clyde's going to run amok?" I ask him when I find

"How dangerous can a llama be?" I ask. "Even a were-llama?" Jake doesn't answer and I cough. "An imaginary one?"

him checking the progress of his science project in the garage. Something about turning lead into gold, or vice versa. Clyde's idea, naturally. So far, one piece has turned into copper, but no gold.

Jake makes a note on his sheet. "Mrs. Fairway said that something's been eating her garden. Something big. I think he's getting out at night. I don't want him to turn when I'm not there."

"How dangerous can a llama be?" I ask. "Even a were-llama?" Jake doesn't answer and I cough. "An imaginary one?"

Jake shivers. "He gets a little crazy when he turns. And he's not imaginary."

"Right, bird brain."

Still, as I'm walking to Simon's house, I look at Mrs. Fairway's garden. She's right; something is eating it. There are big chunks taken out of almost all her plants. There are also two-toed hoof tracks in the soil.

Nice going, Jake. Very realistic, I think, before hurrying off to Simon's.

"SO WHY DO YOU THINK SHE'S SLEEPING?" Simon asks one day. We're sitting on the floor of Addy's room, staring up at the ceiling. A masked ball is going on up there, one where all the dancers are animals wearing masks shaped like human faces. "And what about her dreams?"

I shrug. "Doctors can't say. Just that she's really asleep, not in a coma or anything, and that we should just wait for her to wake up. The dream thing—they don't even try to explain that. Well, one did. Repressed feelings or being stressed out or something. Said he's seen something like it in a boy in Cincinnati. I think he really wanted to be a psychiatrist."

Simon snorts. "My mom'd have a coronary if someone told her to wait around and see if her daughter woke up."

I shrug again. My parents haven't had coronaries, but Mom has started taking her meals in Addy's room, and Dad comes right up here when he gets home from work, unless he's helping Jake with his science fair project. They don't answer the phone as much anymore. So they didn't even know when the school called to ask them why I need so many doctors' appointments lately.

"Tell me about that thing with the eggs again," I say. So Simon tells me about the time he filled a janitor's closet at his old school with eggs. Not fresh ones. Hardboiled ones, without the shells, so they were all slippery. He filled the closet with them, and then got some friends to spill Coke in the hallway. So the janitor went to get the mop, and out came hundreds of hardboiled eggs. They slid all over the hallway, with people kicking them like soccer balls.

Overhead, the dancers have started to belly-flop into a pool of Jell-O with their costumes still on. "What'd your parents do?" I ask.

"Grounded me for about two months," Simon says. "And instituted a family game night. Tyddlywinks, Risk. Monopoly. I thought I'd cry ev-

ery time I saw that stupid top hat. It was totally lame."

We used to play games a lot. The last time we played Monopoly, Jake won in about an hour. So my Dad found an old dart board in the garage, and we played that instead. Mom won. She did a funny dance and accidentally threw the dart at one of her clay flower pots on the back porch. Chipped the rim.

We haven't played any games since Addy fell asleep. We hardly even turn on the television anymore. It's like, if anyone in the house has any real fun, if we forget for a minute that she's asleep, she'll get worse.

AT SCHOOL, THE GROUPS THAT MY SISTER is part of—student council, prom decoration, speech and debate, intramurals—start to quietly elect new "temporary" officers to sub for Addy. Mara Highfield is selected to replace her in the drama club's production of *My Fair Lady*. She simpers around school like she deserves the role, all wide-eyed and *faux*-grateful. I glare when I see her and her friends in the hallway, but they're seniors, so they don't notice a freshman's stare.

Jake gets sent home from class for ruining the bean sprout science experiment of one of the kids in his grade. He claims that Clyde ate them, and the school recommends that he see their counselor once a week.

My grades are dropping, but no one seems to notice. Well, no one but Mrs. Milinsky.

"Are you doing all right, Jenny?" she asks after class. Simon is waiting for me, but I shake my head at him, and he goes on.

"I'm fine," I say as I pick at the corner of my book.

Mrs. Milinsky tucks a stand of frizzy brown hair behind her ear. "I heard about your sister. That must be hard on you."

I move my head, neither a shake nor a nod.

"I'm concerned because you haven't been paying attention in class. And your homework—when you do it—isn't up to your usual standard." She ruffles through some papers on her desk and produces one of mine. A big C is written across it in bright red. I haven't gotten less than a B since third grade. Funnily, though, it doesn't bug me. Instead, I just think about the letters that were doing a jive in Addy's dreams three nights ago. The whole alphabet, with some of the letters wearing tutus, dancing on the ceiling.

"Sorry," I mumble. "I'll do better."

Mrs. Milinsky doesn't look convinced. My heart thuds a little when she says, "I'm going to send your parents a note to ask for a meeting. I'm worried about you, Jenny."

I wait for the note to arrive, but I never see it. My parents haven't been opening the mail, and there are piles of envelopes all over the house. On the chairs, in the kitchen counters, under the couches. Some on the back of the toilet—an electric bill, a flyer on ghost removal (which I think about taking down to the curry place), and a *Plow and Hearth* catalog. So they don't

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mention a conference with Mrs. Milinsky, and I keep getting Cs.

I SIT ON THE FLOOR OF ADDY'S ROOM, watching her dreams. One keeps popping up; I see a version of it every few days. In it, she dashes from project to project without finishing any of them. She steps onto a stage, only to hear someone calling her from the wings. She rushes into the darkness, her costume flowing around her, to be presented with paints for pep club banner. Halfway through the sign, a school guidance counselor appears with a ream of college applications. Addy tries to fill them out, using the red paint from the banner. Jake steps out of the shadows, a chess board in his hands, and then Mom brandishes a dusting rag at Addy. I lounge on the floor at her feet, jabbering at fifty miles an hour, and then the phone rings. It's Marcus Deramo, but Addy can't answer, because Dad has asked her to watch a TV program with him.

ONE DAY AFTER SCHOOL, I FIND MOM in the upstairs hallway, trying to brush the ceiling with a broom. She stops when she sees me, then lifts her hand and gestures upward. One of Addy's dreams is misting around near the ceiling. In it, Mrs. Fairway from next door is walking a chinchilla the size of a hippo.

I'm selective. I capture only the best dreams—the strangest, the scariest, the most beautiful.

"They're getting out," she says a little breathlessly. "Jake keeps leaving the door open."

I snigger. "Are you sure it isn't Clyde?" I ask.

Mom scowls at me. "I don't think you should encourage him, Jenny. He hasn't brought any real friends home in weeks." She waves the broom toward the dream, but that only wafts it an inch or so.

We try catching the dream in Jake's old butterfly net, scooping it up in an empty pickle jar. We point a rotating fan toward the ceiling, but the air just glides right through the dream. Jake starts up the stairs and then retreats, shaking his head. We blow at it with our mouths, hurl thick blankets to wrap around it and pull it down. Dusk falls outside, and the dream still hangs stubbornly in the air, but we don't care. We're laughing so hard that we have to hold our sides.

"I guess it doesn't matter," Mom says finally. She's slid down the wall to the floor of the hallway. "I just thought I'd try to get it back into her room."

I'm about to slide down beside her, but just then I think of something. "Hold on," I say, then run to my bed-

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room. I dig through the closet, finally finding an old shoebox full of things I don't want, but can't bring myself to throw away. The dreamcatcher lies tangled in an old mobile Jake made for me, but I manage to pull them apart.

It's not a fancy one, just a souvenir some friend of Dad's brought me from Arizona. A small hoop with a web inside it, two blue beads caught in the threads. A few mangled feathers dangle down from the hoop. What had Dad's friend said? That Indians used them to catch bad dreams.

I take it out into the hall and see that Addy's dream has shifted. It's raining, and she's huddled under a huge leaf, trying to write a term paper, her prom dress getting soaked. I hold the dreamcatcher up as high as I can, and it sort of sucks the dream into itself. In a minute, the ceiling is empty.

Mom smiles, pushes herself up, and comes over to me. "Good idea, sweetie," I think she's about to say. I imagine her stroking her hand over my hair, and then, inside my head, I'm telling her about everything, just like I used to. My grades, skipping school, the detention I got for bringing to school one of those winged puppies Dad's client left at the vet's. (They didn't care that Vicky Goldstein said she wanted to adopt it.)

But she only takes the dreamcatcher from me, saying, "I'd better check on her. Make sure that didn't hurt her or anything. I'll just be a sec." No congratulations on my idea, no thanks, just that preoccupied frown she wears so often, the one that means she's miles away even while she's standing right there. Then she's closing the door to Addy's room behind her.

I wait in the hall for a while, but it just keeps getting darker, and the door stays shut.

I TRY TO FALL ASLEEP. I LIE ON MY BED for hours, my eyes squeezed shut. I imagine sleeping for days, for weeks, my dreams flashing in the air around me. If I fall asleep and can't wake up, if my dreams float out into the hallway, maybe my parents will notice them.

Then Jake wanders in and asks me to walk him down to the store to buy carrots for Clyde. I keep my eyes shut for a long time, until he asks again and pinches my arm.

"Are you asleep, Jenny?" he asks.

"No," I say in disgust, and open my eyes.

"I HAVE AN IDEA," I TELL SIMON. "For a prank. A bigger one than your egg thing."

We test it first, to make sure it will work. I take the dreamcatcher with Addy's dream in it, and we go to the tennis court in the park. With a rock, I smash one of the blue beads, and Addy's dream streams out. The rain and the thunder, her trying to stay dry under the leaf. With no ceiling to hold it down, it floats skyward until we can't see it anymore. So we pool our money and buy twenty dreamcatchers from the Indian shop downtown.

I take the dreamcatcher with Addy's dream in it, and we go to the tennis court in the park. With a rock, I smash one of the blue beads, and Addy's dream streams out.

I'm selective. I capture only the best dreams—the strangest, the scariest, the most beautiful. I sit in Addy's room whenever Mom or Dad aren't in there, weighing the dreams, choosing this one over that. I'm careful not to pick ones that would embarrass her until Dad forgets to pick me up from the mall—even after I call to ask where he is—and I have to walk home in the rain. Then I catch a new one of her kissing Marcus.

Finally, on a Tuesday night, I fill the last of the dreamcatchers. Then I call Simon on the phone. "Tomorrow," I tell him. "Before the assembly."

I lie on my bed, the shoebox of dreamcatchers at my feet. Through the open window, I can hear Jake sitting in the backyard, talking very seriously to Clyde, admonishing him to stop eating Mrs. Fairway's plants. Through the wall, I hear the creak of springs as Addy shifts in her bed, dreaming.

MORNING. MY STOMACH FEELS LIKE I ate twelve corndogs and then hopped on a roller coaster. I try to go back to sleep, but I can't, so I get up and pull on my jeans and shirt as quietly as possible. No one else in the house is moving yet, but I don't put on my shoes. Instead, I gather them up along with the shoebox and soft-foot it across the hall and down the stairs.

It's cool and dewy outside. Most of the neighbors still haven't gotten their papers; they lie in rainsacks on the driveways. I walk quickly to school, bypassing Simon's house. We've agreed to meet behind the dumpster outside the science wing, rather than at his place.

We aren't supposed to meet until seven, so I end up waiting while the light changes from gray to yellow. I feel jazzed up, itchy, so that I don't want to stand still for long. I read all the graffiti on the dumpster, seeing who loves who and who thinks who is skanky. I think about Jake, and if I should tell Mom and Dad about how weird things have gotten with Clyde. There are hoof prints all around the house now. Jake makes more every day—or Clyde does—even in Mom's flower garden, though she doesn't notice. Plus, I don't think they've realized that he's stopped eating meat, because Clyde doesn't like it. And he's not even that good at hiding the chicken under the leftover mashed potatoes on his plate. I try to worry about Mrs. Milinsky sending another note home, but I can't work up to it; my parents probably wouldn't remember to tell me even if they did find it in the piles of mail. I take the dreamcatchers out and look at them, but I can't remember which dream is in which web. I wonder if Marcus will see the one of Addy kissing him. Even if he doesn't, someone will surely tell him about it.

Until today, I've been the only person who knew that Addy liked Marcus. I knew even before I saw her dreams about him. She told me, back before she fell asleep.

I'm thinking so hard that I jump about a foot when Simon taps me on the shoulder.

"Hey," he says.

I feel funny, a little spacey, but I smile at him. "Hey," I say, picking up the shoebox and jiggling it. "You ready?"

Simon bites his lip and slumps his shoulders even more than usual. His hair hangs down so that I can't quite see his eyes. "Listen," he mumbles. "About this. I can't, Jenny."

"What?" I shake my head. "What do you mean?"

A flush of pink has lit his cheeks, and he scuffs the toe of his shoe against the ground. "I can't help you."

"But we planned it."

"I know."

We stand in silence for a minute before I say, "Why?"

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"Some days, you just want the dragon to win."

Simon brushes his hair back. "My parents. They'd kill me. I've never done anything like this, and they'd freak out. Ground me until fall. And there's this music camp I want to go to this summer—a rock camp. So…"

I think I've got something in my ears, that I've misheard him.

"But you have done stuff like this. The egg thing—"

Simon coughs, his cheeks going redder. "I, uh, I made that up. Or, I mean, it did happen. At my old school. But I didn't have anything to do with it."

I stand there, my hands gripping the shoebox of dreamcatchers. "What about the other stories?" He doesn't answer, and I purse my lips. "Did you ever even skip school in L.A.?"

"A few times," he says. Then he grins. "Not as much as with you."

A few cars have pulled into the parking lot; it's gotten later while we've stood here. I should probably abandon the prank. But I find myself turning away from Simon and walking toward the school. That spacey feeling grips me, so that I might be walking on jelly, and my ears buzz.

In the gymnasium, the bleachers have been pulled out; there's going to be an assembly during first period. Something about drugs or sex or college. A few guys in black are lounging in one upper corner, but otherwise the gym is empty.

I walk to the middle of the basketball court and stop. There's still time to quit. But it's like I'm in my own dream, one where I'm a puppet without any control over what I do. I kneel down on the ground, remove the shoebox lid. I pick up the first dreamcatcher, and the metal paperweight I swiped from Mom's desk. Placing the dreamcatcher on the empty lid, I raise my hand and bring the paperweight down on the bead, smashing it.

The dream erupts toward the ceiling. I catch a glimpse of a dragon, glorious and shiny, breathing fire, but I'm already reaching for the next hoop. Smash. A vision of a prom, with everyone wearing clothes made out of icicles. My parents, watching as Jake and I blow bubbles the size of cars. Smash. Smash smash smash.

Soon the dreams are crowding in the air. They elbow for room, mix with each other, so that Addy and Marcus kiss in the rings of Saturn and the dragon stalks through the prom while Jake teaches equations how to sing. Someone has noticed and word has spread. Groups huddle around the edge of the court, murmuring, pointing upward. It's getting loud in the gym, hot as more and more people push in to see.

I thought I would be laughing, or dashing off before I got caught. But I can't seem to move. I'm stuck, kneeling on the floor, bits of broken beads and dreamcatchers tossed around me. I close my eyes, so that I can't see the dreams or the people or anything. It's too much; I can't contain it. If I open my eyes, I'll cease to be real. I'll become a dream myself.

It's only when the principal comes to lead me to her office that I open my eyes. She's scowling, trying to decide whether to yell at me first or call the janitor to try and corral the dreams. By the look on her face, I'm pretty sure I'm in a massive amount of trouble.

The principal orders me to my feet and points toward her office, saying something about me and my parents and suspension. She marches along beside me, her back straight with outrage.

Strangely, though, I don't feel very worried. Something warm and thick as honey hugs me, so different from the thin, wispy dreams that swirl overhead. Relief, maybe, or something like it, shot with a tingle of anticipation, so welcome that it feels like falling asleep, or waking up. ❧

Eilis O'Neal lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she is managing editor of *Nimrod International Journal*. Her YA fantasy novel, *The False Princess*, is forthcoming from Egmont USA in early 2011. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Strange Horizons, Fantasy Magazine, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Zahir: A Journal of Speculative Fiction,* and others. She can be found online at www.eilisoneal.com.

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The
FALL
OF THE
MOON
BY JAY LAKE
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Hassan polished the twisted beech keel of his boat. The vessel had been a-building for years, assembled only from holy wood—thrown up by the raging Sea of Murmurs which even now coiled on the western horizon frothing like blood—and his grandfather's bones. It was not a large boat, but Hassan was not a large man. All he intended was to ride the Tide of Spring.

His work of late had been mostly in waiting. His grandfather had passed as all men someday do, with a familiar smile on his old man's face and a strange woman's name on his young man's lips. Hassan had carefully burned his grandfather's flesh to send the soul spiraling toward the outer moons, then baked the flensed bones in an oven built from clay mixed with his own blood.

The old man had emerged grinning and polished, pale and harder than he had ever been in life.

Now those bones were fitted into the ribs of the beech-keeled boat. It cost a soul to sail upon the Sea of Murmurs, a sacrifice endlessly renewed upon the smoking waves. Hassan had whispered his grandfather's name as he'd fitted each knuckle, each rib, each long bone, until the syllables had vanished from his mind with the final setting of the jaw in the tiller lock.

His grandfather had become the boat. A soul to sail on the sea, while Hassan remained a breathing man with his eyes open six feet above the welcoming soil.

"I will live forever," Hassan told his grandfather.

The boat said nothing, though Hassan thought he could hear it breathing.

"You listen, boy. You've ears to hear." The old man's hand was a crab's claw, twisted fingers bent together to grab young elbows in pain. "There's more to this world, and more, even as God wills us to be here."

Hassan smiled. "Drink your tea, Grandfather." Hassan passed a little clay tumbler over to a shivering hand. They lived in a small hut hard by a cypress, as far from Telos as anyone did.

Alone together, thinking thoughts, the two of them.

"Tea." His grandfather grimaced. "This isn't real tea. More like seaweed soup. Tea grows in little sacks on bushes tended by coolies on the sides of steep mountains."

"What are coolies?"

After a long pause, his grandfather puffed out a ragged breath. "I don't know, boy. I don't know either."

"I will live forever," Hassan told his grandfather. The boat said nothing, though Hassan thought he could hear it breathing.

Obsidian cliffs towered behind the village of Telos, a wall sheer and hard enough to daunt even the most adventurous boys. Each day their dark glass reflected the setting sun in a multiplicity of dim fetches, a small, stubborn galaxy brought down close to the land for casual inspection. They made a mirrored hell of the Little Moons and the Great Moons on nights when the entire sky danced.

If a boy risked all to tramp across the sands at low tide, he could turn back and see the carved tops of the cliffs. There was a city there, a thousand thousand times greater than Telos had ever dreamed of being with its three waterfalls and single corral.

The contrast between the glittering ramparts high above and the little driftwood homes below could strain even the most stoic heart. Very few ever chanced the damp sand and the red-boiled wrath of the waves for a glimpse.

Otherwise the village and lives of its people unfolded in the strip of hay meadows and salt marshes and twisted cypress trees that stood as stubborn as life between the glassy cliffs and the burning sea. It was a world that reminded folk of their place with each ragged breath and staggering step.

Only Hassan's grandfather had been different, and through him, Hassan.

The night Hassan's grandfather died, Etienne the hetman burned the village library. Hassan stood in the flickering light of blazing paper, watching sparks arc from the useless, melting datacubes.

"It does us no good," the hetman told Hassan. The village leader was an older man, blocky and stolid, uncle to Hassan's late mother, and had always claimed a soft spot toward Hassan.

"It's what we know," Hassan muttered.

"No." Etienne's voice was a quiet, intense reflection of Grandfather's. Like a version of the old man kept in a bottle. "We know the tides, and when the sea burns and stings, and to avoid the splinters of the cliffs. We know how the rains come and when they stay away. We know when to plant the maize and when to walk the fields plucking the borers from the stalks. *That's* what we know. Not the names of kings and admirals and who discovered each of the metals."

Hassan stared into the spitting fire. "He always said we were lost."

"Maybe. But here is where we are found. Here is where we will stay."

"Here." The obsidian cliffs gleamed in the night as Hassan raised his eyes to the empty stars.

"It's a good life," said Etienne.

The hetman had missed one book. When Hassan went to fold his grandfather's bedroll for the last time—Martine needed it for her middle son—he found the ragged volume beneath. It had a spine of split bamboo that had been bound and rebound many times.

His grandfather had taught Hassan much about what few books they had. But Hassan had never seen this one.

He turned his find over in his hand. The cover was stretched leather, perhaps an eelskin, though he couldn't be sure as it was worn with long handling. When he opened the book, the pages crackled.

Whatever the original creators had meant to say had been long lost to the scribings of dozens of others. Writing crabbed across the pages, up, down, sideways, on a slant, in the colors of different inks and the soft gray of clay and the dark red of blood.

Voices from the past.

He even recognized his grandfather's hand.

Hassan sat down to read.

"Boy," it said in the old man's shaky block printing. Hassan had never been able to master writing himself. "First, you'll need my bones."

ONCE THERE HAD BEEN BOATS WHICH sailed the seas, both the mercurial Sea of Murmurs and the seas of ordinary water that stretched on all the worlds dreaming in the harsh light of the evening stars. Once there were boats which sailed the air, some fast as forked lightning that split the night, others slow as thought. Once there were boats which rode the tides of light that bound the stars together.

Now there were no boats at all.

The book told stories under stories. With practice, Hassan could pick out each hand. As he prepared his grandfather's bones, then searched the beach for the right wood, he would take moments and read the different stories. The hand which had written rounded letters in blood could be picked out of the confusion of the pages just as Maryam's drum could be heard beneath the singing of the village on Round Moon Festival.

Each story was a voice. The book was a chorus. Hassan knew that he would be the last.

The book told him many secrets:

"We are bound here between life and death. The black city on the cliffs behind us is our past. The deadly sea before us is our fate."

"You will need to spend a soul to cross the fiery waters. Do not trade your own."

"Our life was never meant to be this way. I cannot believe that either God or any man intended such for us."

"Love while you can, live as you must."

"I will be free beyond the horizon."

"Beechwood thrown up by the sea will make a suitable keel. Cypress smokes until the oil bursts into flame."

"This is the way to build a boat: attend to the pictures of my poor hand."

"Sail away."

"Live forever."

"Sail away."

"We are bound here between life and death. The black city on the cliffs behind us is our past. The deadly sea before us is our fate." "You will need to spend a soul to cross the fiery waters. Do not trade your own."

ETIENNE CAME TO HASSAN IN THE month after his grandfather's death.

"The old man needs to be within the soil," the hetman said.

"He goes there piece by piece," Hassan whispered. It had been among the first lessons of the book, marked with some urgency.

You will need to spend a soul.

"There is talk in the village."

"There is always talk in the village. I do my duty."

Etienne grabbed Hassan's shoulder, squeezed it, a sort of distancing hug. "You are not healthy out here. Move into the town. Woo Maryam. She sees you as being...of interest."

I will be free beyond the horizon.

"No. I bury him in pieces, in all the places he loved." Such a lie, Grandfather had loved nothing but books. "He returns to soil."

"You are as strange as he."

Hassan had no answer for that.

A FEW WEEKS AFTER HASSAN FOUND the beechwood for the keel, the Sea of Murmurs ran with mice and rats. The surf came rolling in oily sheets, tumbling the screaming animals to the sand. All of Telos scrambled along the beaches with nets and pots to harvest such a bounty of meat and pelts. In the normal course of life the village had only goats and a few surly chickens too precious to eat and too troublesome to roust out of the papaya trees.

This was a feast, one of the sea's rare gifts among its endless curses.

The bounty ended suddenly in a wave of larger things with teeth like needles and a dozen scampering feet. These creatures slaughtered the survivors of the rodent tide, then had to be driven back into the sea with sticks and shouts and some injuries.

Still they feasted, though many limped and Majid the Younger lost three toes and a piece of one calf.

"BOY," HIS GRANDFATHER SAID. "Wake up."

Hassan blinked. Had he been sleeping?

The old man was young, younger than Hassan had ever known him, his fingers strong and supple as he shook Hassan's shoulders. "There's a Tide of Spring coming. After that, fires and the fall of the moon. Be ready, boy."

"I'm ready," Hassan said, but he spoke only to the empty hut. He went out to work on the boat by moonlight.

The book had this to say, in a reeling purple hand which spoke but rarely throughout the threaded pages:

"A moon will fall in time, as it has before. The black city was broken by a bright fist from above. The red sea was poisoned by a dark fist from beneath. All life changes."

All life changes.

The night after his grandfather came to him, Hassan carved those words in his chest with a bone needle and some fire ash, then cried for the old man for the first time until the pain and blood-slicked sweat sent him into fever dreams of green fields of tea and giant brass coolies with the slack faces of apes, the wicked eyes of goats, and the tears of a lonely young man.

Etienne's visits became fairly regular, usually while Hassan was polishing his grandfather's bones or fitting pieces of bone and wood into the boat.

"Maryam will soon wed Majid the Younger," the hetman said one day. "They have trod the corn together, and he has already captured a gull for the feast."

"Don't like gull meat." Hassan tried to grin at Etienne. When had he last seen Maryam? "Stringy and sour."

"You likewise." Etienne patted the boat's gunnel. "I know what this is."

"It's a boat."

They both glanced toward the Sea of Murmurs. The water was a violent blue today, silver-finned mermaids singing sweetly perhaps half a kilometer offshore. Deadly.

"Such…craft and dedication…would serve Telos well. You could build a new council house. With your name upon the door for generations to read."

I will live forever.

But Hassan said nothing.

After a while Etienne deposited a sack of papayas, squeezed Hassan's shoulder, and departed.

One day the boat was done. Hassan simply knew that. He measured its length in three paces, its breadth in one, sighted down the oars carved so painstakingly in accordance with the rare picture drawn in a stained brown hand in the last book. Then he covered it over with a woven mat, walked into Telos, and began to survey the ground for a new council house.

"So you are finally done with the old man," the hetman said. "Perhaps you would sup with my family tonight?

It was something to do while waiting for the Tide of Spring.

Etienne misunderstood.

"So you are finally done with the old man," the hetman said. "Perhaps you would sup with my family tonight? Crazy cousin Hassan is come to town, my daughters are saying."

Love while you can, live as you must.

"I will see the children," Hassan said quietly. He was surprised to find his voice creaking so.

Something like a shadow flitted across Etienne's face. "They have not been children for a while."

One evening as Hassan worked at carving out the notch in a cross-beam just so, he realized that the world felt different. Wrong.

It was the light.

He looked up.

The Round Moon was just bellying over the obsidian cliffs to the east. First

and Third Little Moons danced in the mid-sky as always. But al-Maghrib, the Soulful Moon of Paradise, was too large, too low.

"The Fall of the Moon," he whispered.

Hassan dropped his tools and sprinted from town. He had to get to his boat. Behind him people shouted, cried out, called to one another. Even as he left their words behind, Hassan could hear it was him they spoke of, not the Soulful Moon.

It did not matter. He would ride the Sea of Murmurs beyond the horizon and live forever.

Dragging his boat down the sand was back-breaking work. Small as it was, the craft was heavy. His grandfather's soul seemed to serve as an anchor, a tether. Had Hassan misunderstood it all?

"You are too late for doubts," he told himself.

The Sea of Murmurs rumbled behind him. It sounded almost gravelly, running thick tonight.

"I follow your secrets, Grandfather."

"Hassan."

He looked up. It was Etienne, looking much like his grandfather by some trick of the moon's light. The hetman had half a dozen others with him, including two of his daughters.

"Leave it off, Hassan. Come home."

"I must take my boat down to the sea."

"No. There is work to be done. None of us have much, so each of us is precious. Leave off your grief."

"It's hope, not grief!" Hassan shouted.

When they came for him, he laid to with the oar until he broke ribs on one of his girl-cousins.

As she screamed, Etienne waved the others off. "Please, Hassan. Come home."

"No." Secrets spilled from his lips like rain from a careless cloud. "This is the Fall of the Moon, and the Tide of Spring. I must away before the world ends. I must be free."

"Come home and be free."

Hassan threw the oar back into the boat and returned to his dragging. After a moment, Etienne leaned into the stern and pushed. "Come on," the hetman shouted, "the sooner he sinks his silly boat, the sooner we all go home."

But the growing light of the Soulful Moon gave lie to the words and hope to Hassan's heart.

I will be free beyond the horizon.

The Sea of Murmurs ran with sand and soil, a foam of wiggling worms atop the heaving brown tide. Was this the Tide of Spring? Hassan couldn't imagine how the boat could navigate such a muddy, almost-solid expanse.

Most of Telos had come down to the beach to watch the madman and his boat. Some cried, casting him hot looks, especially those tending his injured girl-cousin. Others stared at the blazing moon. Wind drove along the sand, carrying soil from the sea and an unexpected heat.

Hassan dropped his tools and sprinted from town. He had to get to his boat. Behind him people shouted, cried out, called to one another. Even as he left their words behind, Hassan could hear it was him they spoke of, not the Soulful Moon.

Hassan could believe this to be the end of the world.

"Look!" someone shouted.

There was color in the sea. Flashes here and there, like fire sparks on a distant stretch of beach.

The Tide of Spring?

Then all the muddy water burst into bloom, a thousand million billion flowers exploding on the Sea of Murmurs in a riot of color and scent. Hassan grabbed the bow of his boat and ran. It was light as a palm leaf, floating across the sand behind him. When he glanced back, he saw many hands helping.

His feet met the sea on the first spray of petals from the incoming tide. Hassan ran until the flowers were up to his knees. There was still water down below, a thick syrupy nectar, but even below the surface it was filled with the soft nudging of blooms. The boat slid in among the raging color as if made for the task, and Hassan tumbled into it. He would cross the horizon. He would live forever.

"Who will you take with you?" asked Etienne, waist-deep in flowers, his face glowing sad and hard by the blazing light of the Soulful Moon.

"Grandfather," Hassan answered. He sat down on the single bench, nodded to the gleaming bones worked in among the planks of the boat, and bent to his oars. Each stroke broke the surface of the Sea of Murmurs with a spray of perfumed scent that shivered his spine.

Behind him, they cried on the beach as the Soulful Moon fell. When he looked over his shoulder, Hassan saw that lights winked on one by one in the black cities atop the obsidian cliffs.

Then Hassan turned his face to the horizon, and freedom, even as the moon fell and the air burned and flowers carried him in his grandfather's arms to someplace he never could have known before. ❧

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects. His 2010 books are *Pinion* from Tor Books, *The Specific Gravity of Grief* from Fairwood Press, *The Baby Killers* from PS Publishing, and *The Sky That Wraps* from Subterranean Press. His short fiction appears regularly in literary and genre markets worldwide. Jay is a winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy awards.

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Saint's-Paw

by Alan Smale

Rachel ran. Death galloped after her on horseback, that grisly death reserved for nosy girls, witches, and saints-to-be. She almost tripped on the uneven stone steps, so focused was she on the oaken door above. Exultation filled her as she slapped the iron door-handle.

Six soldiers rode into the clearing behind her on high-stepping horses, wearing swords at their belts and surcoats against the chill. Rachel couldn't help thinking that two or three of them would have sufficed, or even just one wiry old chap on a donkey. Perhaps they had nothing better to do.

Once the soldiers saw Rachel at the church they reined in comfortably, unperturbed at their failure to catch her on the road. Even if the door had been barred against her, denying her access, her hand on the iron would have sufficed to grant her sanctuary. But it swung open, and Rachel tumbled triumphantly into the Church of St. Stephan, His Hand, and spread-eagled herself on the flagstones. If she skinned her knees she barely noticed because that was nothing, the least of her worries. Couldn't it have been much worse than that? It could. How much worse? Immeasurably.

After all, St. Stephan himself was hung from a rope and then cut down still alive and choking, disemboweled but not completely, and then torn apart by four horses forced to gallop off toward the wind's four quarters pulling ropes attached to his limbs. And then they burned the various pieces of Stephan in a hastily constructed bonfire, all except for His Hand, which had gotten itself kicked aside into the grass in the excitement. And that had all happened right here in the clearing, a hundred years ago.

Of course, the church hadn't been here then to grant him sanctuary. It was built afterward, in commemoration of his life and sacrifice. Stephan's blood and ash must have fertilized the very grass outside, some Stephan-essence sucked up into the trees with the sap.

It was a macabre conceit. Rachel realized that, once again, she was thinking too much.

As the door swung closed behind her and shut her into the dusty gloom of the church, Rachel allowed herself to believe she had won. Her whooping laughter startled the birds in the church steeple and sent them aflutter. She sounded like a madwoman but cared naught for that, at least until a stern and disapproving voice came from the shadows: "Quiet, in the house of God!"

"Sorry," Rachel gasped, sun-dazzled, her eyes searching the murk. "Father?"

A priest approached her with a frown like thunder. "This is no place for child's play."

"Sanctuary," said Rachel. "I am pursued by soldiers." The priest's mouth twitched downward, and she added: "Unjustly."

Old and tonsured, he was a soft butterball of a man who did not look strong enough to forcibly evict her. "Sanctuary," said Rachel. "I am pursued by soldiers." The priest's mouth twitched downward, and she added: "Unjustly."

He sized up her skinny frame with a disdainful sniff: untidy ponytails bouncing on her shoulders, face a little too freckled and snub-nosed to be taken seriously. Brown-armed from the fields. Urchin girl.

Rachel did not recognize him. The Church of St. Stephan was set midway between five villages and used by all of them, but Rachel's parents were rare and grudging churchgoers who preferred to join those who performed the minimum Sunday devotions in the village square. Perhaps she'd seen this priest before, at a christening or a funeral, but to Rachel all clerics looked much of a muchness.

It was triply ironic that Rachel should be calling upon the power of God in whom she didn't believe, to protect her from soldiers who sought to destroy her for acts a God-fearing girl would never have considered, via a priest who saw her as merely a disturbance and an embarrassment.

"Rubbish," he snorted. She eyed the age-spots on his hands as he waddled past the font to the door; hands, Rachel knew, gave away folks' personalities and vintage more readily than faces, and the elderly softness of the priest's hands reinforced her growing confidence.

He tugged the door open with some effort. Beyond, in the bright afternoon sunshine, the half-dozen soldiers were gathering sticks and branches to make a fire. Their horses, content to be far from longbow and cannon, grazed untethered by the trees.

The soldiers had good sight lines to the front and side doors of the church, and were clearly settling in for a long wait.

"Humph." He shoved the door closed again. "Well!"

A chill traveled Rachel's spine. It was probably soldiers just such as these who had performed the gruesome last rites on St. Stephan.

The priest glared. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Rachel's head hurt, and at that moment she genuinely couldn't remember. Nothing worth suffering bloodily at the hands of armed men, she was sure.

The priest fretted. Pointing at the door he began, "*They* wouldn't—"

"I said 'nothing!'" she screamed in sudden fury, and stomped off down the aisle. She was sorely tempted to kick at the pews on either side in passing, to burn out some of her anger, but that would not be grown-up and would earn her even less sympathy than she was currently getting.

She recalled it now, of course: her father's face static and waxy before her, her mother's terrified screech, the ropes around her wrists, the icy chill of her ducking in the pond. Her breath scraped raw in her throat.

It was not a large church. A few more strides brought Rachel to the altar. Perhaps she had intended to prostrate herself on the altar steps; that might at least earn her some belated credit

with the clergyman. But now she stood transfixed, with all thought of that gone from her head.

The Hand of St. Stephan sat on a velvet cushion inside a case of glass, mounted into the altarpiece.

Despite the obvious clue of the church's name, Rachel had had no inkling that the saint's real, genuine, honest-to-God Hand was housed here. As a rule they must have covered the relic with the altar-cloth. It certainly hadn't been on public display at any weddings or harvest festivals Rachel had attended.

She found herself down on her skinned and stinging knees. Her head spun.

The Hand was curled like a claw, its fingers pressed together and the ball of its thumb pressed against the knuckle of the index finger as if working to prevent it from extending. She saw chipped, yellow fingernails over a gray skin, the severed wrist capped with a sheath of twisted black leather.

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The priest hurried up behind her, reaching out to grab, but when Rachel turned and raised her arms to ward him off he backed off quickly.

Why? Because despite the ducking, Rachel still had blood on her hands, real, dark smears of her father's dried blood.

"Holy Lord...!" said the priest. Not to her, obviously.

"I didn't kill anyone," she said. "He was dead already."

In a woodcarving to the left of the altar St. Stephan consulted with princes, palms raised as if preaching. A companion piece to the right showed him buckled and bent, a noose around his neck in martyrdom. In both carvings his expression was beatific. Rachel doubted he'd really ever looked like that.

In that moment Rachel understood two things: Even here, in church, she was far from safe. And once a tribunal had found her guilty of witchcraft and handily killed her, no one would commemorate her story in a woodcarving.

In that moment Rachel understood two things: Even here, in church, she was far from safe. And once a tribunal had found her guilty of witchcraft and handily killed her, no one would commemorate her story in a woodcarving. She'd be forgotten in weeks. Days, maybe.

The truth focused her. She gazed up at the priest and willed tears into her eyes, which at this moment was not too difficult.

"Help me, Father! By the Hand of St. Stephan, please help me!"

"Is curiosity a sin?"

"Sometimes. Often, if untempered by humility."

Rachel sighed. Ask a silly question.

Despite his earlier vexation with Rachel, the priest certainly liked to lean in and put his hand protectively over hers. Rachel was not too comfortable with that. But if it made him more likely to help her, she could endure it.

When Rachel was three years old, her mother had found her crawling in the pigpen on all fours. Apparently little Rachel had wanted to know what it was like to *be* a pig, and had let no barrier prevent her from finding out. Thus, she'd also learned what it was like to be beaten by her mother.

"Curiosity killed the cat," her mother had snapped, a phrase perhaps more prescient than she'd realized.

A few years later Rachel had helped her father slaughter one for dinner; a pig, that is, not a cat. By this time she was much more interested in the bright colors of the pig's entrails than in preparing its carcass to roast.

In hindsight, such events marked the beginning of her problems. That unholy curiosity.

Of course, telling it to the priest, Rachel left out the word "unholy."

"Well," murmured the priest dubiously. "A little girlish enthusiasm. Children, always inquisitive...."

"I knew you'd understand. I *knew*."

As a child Rachel had dug holes down into the earth to see what was below, but had not gotten far. When a tree was felled to make planks for a barn, she'd rushed over to look at its entrails, and was disappointed to find only more wood inside the trunk. She had expected so much more: channels for water, perhaps, or tubes where rotting leaves and dead mice could be sucked up into the crown of the tree for food. She'd heard tell of "rising sap," but was not sure what sap really was. How did a tree feed? What did it eat?

She'd wager humans were more like pigs than trees. But she didn't know for sure.

"Ye...es," said the priest. "But how does this...."

"I'm getting there. This is background. Without it, you won't understand, either."

Rachel was encouraged that the priest had not dismissed her speculations out of hand, or told her tree-parts and sap were God's mysteries, or some other platitude. But now he spoiled it by glancing casually up at the light shining through the narrow stained glass of the church windows.

Rachel paused. Certainly she could see how the shadows worked, too. Knowing the church was aligned east-west, you didn't need to go outside to guess the time of day. But what did that mean? Was he preparing to leave?

"And, food!" she said, trying to distract him anew. "The ways the colors and textures change when you cook things! And then there's the mystery of rhubarb."

"Rhubarb?" he said, startled.

"Imagine being the first person to ever try to cook and eat rhubarb, how did they know it would stop being poisonous once they cooked it?"

"Perhaps they gave it to the pigs first," said the priest rather maliciously, and she pulled her hand away from beneath his.

The priest looked at her hand, and back up at her face, and she saw him thinking, but not about trees and rhubarb.

"You're not going to help me, are you?" said Rachel. "I haven't even told you what I did yet, but you've already decided."

He studied the floor.

"You're going to leave me here, and then they'll come for me. When? Sunset?"

"I have to think of my family. And my flock." He raised his head. "Confess your sins, girl. Maybe God will spare you. And if not, at least you'll die in the grace of His forgiveness." He paused, thinking. "It may go easier for you if you do not resist them. It will not take long. And they might let you live."

"...what?" said Rachel.

Oh, stupid girl. Stupid.

Rachel might think of herself as just a kid with skinned knees. She knew she wasn't even ready for a boyfriend. Yet, girls in the village younger than her were pregnant.

Tribunals were for important people, not village brats.

"Oh, *hell,*" she said. The priest flinched primly.

Panic bubbled in Rachel's throat, and she tried to redirect it into fury. "I'm a witch, you know. Aren't you afraid of what I'll do to you if you don't help me? Rot your balls off, stop your heart beating in your chest?" She stood. "Oh, yes! Curses are the first thing I taught myself!"

He smiled a little sadly, unimpressed. "Such beliefs are for the village, not the house of God."

"*He* wouldn't leave me here," said Rachel, the sweep of her hand including Christ above the altar and the holy relic of the saint below. "And if you were a true man of God, you'd protect me, too."

Panic bubbled in Rachel's throat, and she tried to redirect it into fury. "I'm a witch, you know. Aren't you afraid of what I'll do to you if you don't help me? Rot your balls off, stop your heart beating in your chest?"

"God does not protect witches," said the clergyman. "No more do I."

"But, if you don't believe in witchcraft...." She stopped, hamstrung by the logic.

"Well," shrugged the priest, his standard something-to-say that was no answer at all.

"You're curious, though," she said. "Admit it. You want to know what the crazy girl did. Don't you? That's the only reason you're even still talking to me. It's got nothing to do with absolution. But it'll make no difference. Whatever I say you'll still abandon me here, and once you leave they'll break sanctuary and take me. Won't they?"

He reached for her again. Comfortingly. "Pray to God...."

Rachel pulled her hands away. "Stop. Give me a weapon. Give me anything. Or just shut up and get away from me."

OUTSIDE, THE SHADOWS LENGTHENED. The roads in both directions were empty. The countryside was not like the city; honest people did not stray after dark, and made sure to be home in good time. Once night fell, nobody would witness whatever happened here at the Church of St. Stephan, His Hand. And if any from her village had been planning to follow after Rachel and the soldiers, they would already be here.

The soldiers. Rachel looked out at them now from the small window at the top of the steeple, thirty feet above the ground.

Their bonfire blazed cheerfully, and around it the soldiers lay, sat, or stood, according to their temperament. It was rare that Rachel saw men gathered together without some storytelling or ribaldry, but these were quiet and inward-looking, and kept their own counsel. Grim men, deadened by their experiences, their souls beaten out of them by what they'd seen and done in the Holy Land. Their silence made them even more frightening than if they'd been sitting around swapping lewd jokes.

Even silent, the threads of power in this group were easy to discern. Growing up in the village, and even more so during her brief stint in the city, Rachel had made a study of such threads.

Lying by the fireside on this cool afternoon was their leader, a balding man in his forties, as muscular as Rachel's blacksmith father. His air of authority radiated from him as surely as the fire radiated heat. Even when he was looking away, the other soldiers behaved as if they were constantly under his scrutiny. He was the stillest of them all, with a patience earned through a lifetime of campaigning. He

directed them with a minimum of effort, hoarding his energy against later need.

Near him sat two other veterans. One of them was polishing something shiny that was too small for Rachel to identify at this distance. The other, longer-haired and more twitchy, looked around him with a constant sneering grin on his face.

Two more junior soldiers guarded the perimeter. These were the men who would come running if Rachel were foolhardy enough to make a break for it. Last, and lowest in the pecking order, was a gangling tawny-haired youth who kept the fire going by fussing with the logs and adding kindling from a pile by his side, while also taking the water bottle from man to man. As Rachel watched, the smiling man handed the bottle back to the youth and cuffed him over the head with ill-concealed contempt, laughing for no reason Rachel could fathom. The boy took the blow without comment and moved on.

Harsh fellows. And perhaps this was Stephan's true legacy, to bring discipline and military skill to men like these who had not possessed it before. Stephan had united the country against the freebooters in their narrow dragon-prowed ships, and the foreigners had been driven off, but as a result he had acquainted the people with soldiering as a profession. Confidence at arms and force as a way of life; these were among the Peacemaker's gifts to his people.

Rachel saw no gesture pass between the soldiers, but in one motion they all turned to stare at her.

It was Rachel's most terrifying moment yet; their cold eyes, their matter-of-fact appraisal. None called up to her, and Rachel had nothing to say to them in return. She had nothing to barter that they could not readily take for themselves.

The youngest lad was barely older than Rachel's oldest brother, Seth, who also aspired to be a soldier. Rachel wondered if the day would come when Seth would lay siege to a young girl in a church.

The smiling man cackled and turned back to the fire. The others followed suit. It wasn't time for Rachel yet. Everything in its due course.

The late sun shone on her, yet she felt chilled.

SHE DESCENDED THE NARROW SPIRAL stairs from the steeple to find the priest on his knees at prayer in the tiny Lady Chapel in the back corner of the church. A sallow statue of the Virgin Mary gazed down upon him. Hey, ma'am! thought Rachel, over here! I'm a girl. Shouldn't you be helping me?

Assuming the priest would leave with just enough time to make it home to one of the nearer villages before sunset, she had at most another hour of his company.

It was Rachel's most terrifying moment yet; their cold eyes, their matter-of-fact appraisal. None called up to her, and Rachel had nothing to say to them in return.

She cleared her throat. "I need to tell you about my father."

"You're just trying to keep me here, to buy time."

"And you wouldn't?" she said.

"They'll wait till sunset whether I leave or stay, you know."

"I know. But someone ought to know my story. Someone has to speak for me, once I'm gone."

He turned and stared at her.

THE TWO THINGS RACHEL HAD LOVED most about the city?

Firstly, the castle, with its giant keep that loomed over the streets to protect them all (as she thought then), its battlements the picture of strength, a stone bastion that might have been there since the dawn of time. Its dry-ditch moat was spanned by a dark, creaking drawbridge, cranked down with chains. Surely the castle's dungeons must be brimming with treasure, and stockpiles of bright swords and shields for the soldiers; in Rachel's innocence she'd never thought they might keep human beings down there.

Her second favorite was market day, bustling with colorful strangers and exotic wares. Cloth from the Silk Road, copper pots, strange foods and herbs and spices, ducks and pigs a-squeal, and over it all the smell of meat being roasted on skewers. Rachel's marketplace was full of friends, from the younger men who winked and joked with her to the older women who pinched her cheeks and mothered her so much more effectively than her own mother did. Rachel had been an inquisitive girl, peeking through everyone's baskets and wagons, into everything with their blessing, the darling of the market with her blonde swirl of hair and her magpie curiosity. She'd gotten her head patted so often it was a wonder she wasn't bald.

She was there with her father, while her mother and brothers stayed back in the village. At the start of the Crusade the lords had called in all the blacksmiths they could find to shoe the horses of the army marching out to war. Her father had been keen to do his part for the war effort and line his pocket accordingly, and he'd taken Rachel along as his little domestic servant to make meals and run errands for him. A regular enough role for a daughter, yet Rachel was delighted at the sign of favor this implied, and this chance of a lifetime.

Back then she had charmed the soldiers effortlessly, and they had bent ears of corn into little toy horses for her. She didn't think it would be so easy to charm the ones outside the Church of St. Stephan, His Hand.

By her mother's reckoning the city had "turned Rachel's head something fierce," and about this, at least, her mother wasn't wrong. The city had shown Rachel how large the world was, how wild and varied its people and products, and how convoluted its

patterns of power. It had been intoxicating.

And her mother had also said: "Nothing good can come from the city," and in that she was probably right, too. Yet, in the end, it was Rachel's father whom it ruined.

In the beginning he'd been too preoccupied with shoeing fifty horses a day to fret over Rachel's absences as she scampered the streets. Freed from her mother and the straitlaced regime of the village, Rachel became a whole new daughter to him, bringing home tales of the broader city he did not have time to visit himself, and revealing more of her personality than she ever dared back home. Later on, when her contacts and insights proved useful, his trepidation turned to pride. It was in the city that the father came to really know the daughter, and bless her curiosity.

"Be canny," he'd said. "Aye, be inquisitive. Think for yourself. By all means find ways to make us more comfortable here. Bend rules if you may. Don't get caught."

And perhaps he followed his own advice, in his lingering friendships—"pleasant company," as he'd gruffly say—with two of the market-women Rachel brought home to meet him, "and we don't have to tell your mother about that." Rachel loved their sparkling eyes and their full, swaying skirts, and how they stood with their hands on their hips. She told her father she wanted to be like them when she grew up. Momentarily astonished, he smiled and ruffled her hair and thanked her for the introductions. "Keep it up, lass," he said, and the soldier whose horse was being shod at the time had laughed and laughed.

And perhaps it was down to one of those women, and perhaps not, when her father began to sicken of a wasting disease just a few weeks after he and Rachel returned to the village.

It took him a long time to die and his coughing made the whole village miserable. Again Rachel heard her mother's refrain that "nothing good can come from the city." But from the look in her eyes Rachel knew what she really meant was: Why couldn't it be Rachel dying, instead of her husband?

Rachel had questions of her own. Why was her father dying in the first place? How did our bodies work, that they could falter and fail on such little notice?

And the more immediate question that Rachel tried not to think about: What would become of her, once he died?

The leaves were crisping on the trees as summer gave way to fall. The breeze ran clean and brisk. Her father's body, bathed in vinegar and kept in the shade, did not smell overmuch, and surely not riper than the rest of the village's natural stinks and aromas.

Hearts pumped blood around a human's body, the same as around a pig's or a rabbit's. Different from a tree or a slug.

Rachel stood over him, knife in hand. He was such a gentle soul. How could she harm him?

But there could be no harm to it. Whatever her father had once been, he no longer resided in this silent shell.

"Why did you go?" she asked, out loud.

Her father would not speak again. But it was as if he did. "Do what you must, to find out. But be careful."

In life his skin had seemed as ruddy as leather. Yet the flesh of his arm gave way easily enough under the knife.

Hearts pumped blood around a human's body, the same as around a pig's or a rabbit's. Different from a tree or a slug. Animals didn't talk using any language humans could understand. Animals cried but did not frown. Which was odd, since no animal could put up a hand to shade their eyes. Wouldn't you suppose that all animals would be able to frown?

Even in death, Rachel's father bled for her.

His legs were stiff, but not his arms. This must surely mean something, but Rachel could not imagine what. A day or so earlier it had been the other way around.

His blood oozed, rather than flowing, almost like a jelly. His skin was blue where it had rested against the bed; obviously the blood had pooled there now his heart was no longer beating. Probably all corpses were like this.

Well, now. Her father had died of coughing, clutching his chest. Rachel flapped her hands to drive away the insects, unlaced the rough shirt he had been dressed in, and placed the knife blade against the cold skin over his heart. She would clean him up afterwards. No one would ever know....

From behind Rachel came her mother's scream.

As always, her timing was terrible.

"Sweet Jesus!" said the priest. "Sweet Holy Jesus...." He backed away from her, unable to take his horrified eyes from her face.

"He was dead!" Rachel shouted. "Gone! My mother was supposed to be gone, too, arranging for his burial in the next village, where he was born! She wasn't supposed to be back!"

Rachel followed the priest, desperate to tell him the rest of it; how they'd dragged her into the street, tied her up, ducked her as a witch. How they'd argued whether floating or sinking meant innocence, and how in the end it hadn't mattered a jot anyway.

"I needed to know! I was only trying to help!"

They'd summoned the soldiers; it was the law for cases of witchcraft. Rachel waited a long, agonizing day trussed up like a turkey. And then came the incomprehensible moment almost at the last, when the drum of their hooves on the road could already be heard, and Rachel's mother had turned to her and cut her bonds, muttering, "For God's

sake, you little cow, just run, get out of my sight and never, ever come back."

The story's ending mattered, and if the priest had known it all, surely he'd have understood and taken pity on her.

But he wouldn't hear her. He shouted words she'd never heard before, some in Latin, and then he made a terribly obscene gesture and hurried out of the church, slamming the door behind him.

The sudden stillness terrified her. Rachel held her breath, convinced soldiers would pour in through both doors in the next instant. They did not.

She glanced up at the stained-glass windows, weighing the shadows.

She had maybe half an hour left before nightfall.

AGAIN, RACHEL RAN: DOWN THE AISLE of the church to drop the big wooden crossbar into place across the inside of the big front door. Then back up the aisle, skidding around the font, which rocked alarmingly, to shoot the bolts on the side door. Her blacksmith's-daughter's eye could see how little security these bolts would provide; a few good kicks would tear them out of the wood they were mounted in. The church's safeguards were meant to deter vagrants and casual pilferers, not an armed assault from determined men. Rachel did not, of course, have the keys for the locks in each door.

Rachel spun around twice, eyes darting. What else?

Off she went again to fetch the flints and the tall pole; she lit the candle mounted on the pole's end and used it to light some of the others, high up in sconces on the church walls. Having them come for her in darkness, or lit only by the brands they themselves might carry, would be too awful. Then she retreated into the stairwell that led to the steeple, taking with her a couple more lit candles and everything flammable she could find, which wasn't much: the Bible, a few prayer books.

Would she really have set fire to the Bible? Would it have helped?

Outside, night was falling with horrific speed. There were no more shadows, merely a dull cloudy haze beyond the stained-glass windows.

Rachel could not hear the soldiers. What if some miracle had occurred and they'd packed their saddlebags and left in the meantime? She ran up the stairs.

The smiling man and the youth were banking up the fire. The soldiers at the perimeter stood stretching and bending to work the kinks out of their muscles. Their leader sat up straight. Doing what?

Sharpening his sword.

Readying themselves. They'd come for her soon.

Stark terror swept her, at the thought of those men swarming over her and dragging her from the church. For a moment Rachel's energy deserted her and she sank down with a sob. "Oh, Jesus...."

But, no. Why would God come to the aid of someone who only called

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upon Him at the last? Sudden devoutness, through panic? He would not.

Besides, St. Stephan had surely kept the faith till his last breath. And look what had happened to him.

Rachel pulled herself up and ran downstairs, ran through the church again tugging at the pews, the communion rail, the lectern, but it was as if they'd all been welded in place. What wouldn't she give now for a hammer and chisel from her father's forge?

The Hand of St. Stephan glowed in the half-light.

"Go away," she muttered.

A large brass cross stood on the altar. She pulled at it and amazingly it came away in her hand, not fastened down.

And the pole, of course, that she'd used to light the candles so she could see her enemies coming. She snuffed out the candle atop it and tossed that aside, then whirled the pole around her head. It felt good.

Again, Rachel peered down at the Hand in its casket. Her logical eye could see how the crystals that lined the case took every scrap of candlelight and cast it back out into the church. The Hand had no luminous power of its own. It was just the optical artistry of the smiths who had fashioned the case. Flummery, all of it.

She swung the pole once more. It came around in a fine arc and bounced off the glass case. She stumbled and fell forward onto one of her skinned knees.

Furious now, indignant, she grabbed the cross and beat at the case till it shattered into a thousand glass shards. Several of them were large and jagged, and she picked these up, her best weapons yet.

As an afterthought, Rachel took the Hand with her. Perhaps she felt braver, holding hands with greatness. Perhaps she planned to take the thing apart while she waited. Who knows?

She piled her weapons on the stairs up to the steeple and went back for the font, tipping out the water and dragging the large piece of carved masonry back across the floor, heedless of the broad scratches it left in the flagstones. Let the priest get on his knees and scrub at *those*.

In the narrow entrance to the steeple Rachel arrayed her defenses. The font before her, partly blocking the doorway; the pole to hold the soldiers back; the prayer books and Bible to set alight and shove into their faces; then the cross and the shards of glass for close-work, to jab and gash and blind.

Surely, so well prepared and pumped up with fighting pluck, Rachel could take a *few* of these swine with her.

Surely.

The Hand of St. Stephan glowed in the half-light. "Go away," she muttered.

WAITING IN THE COLD, SILENT CHURCH, Rachel put the Hand of St. Stephan up on the font in front of her. The relic of a hero had to be of some use as a good luck charm.

"Please," she said. "Help me."

Rachel had never prayed before and was not doing so now. Merely asking. But the Hand stayed mute.

"At least you achieved something before they got you." Alone and against the odds, Stephan had united a country.

She looked at it more closely. It was smaller than she'd expected. And its skin felt surprisingly robust; Rachel might have expected the century-old Hand to be a fragile, flaky thing.

"Don't you ever miss the other one?"

That was better. Her voice was strengthening. She was not done yet.

"Drink?" she said. "I suppose you're not thirsty. But I have to say, you look pretty parched."

How on earth long would they make her wait? For full dark? For their dinner to digest? For next Tuesday?

Even as the thoughts floated through her mind, the church was rocked by a blow as if it had been slapped by a giant. Rachel half expected the stained-glass window to explode inward.

The side door fell in on the second crashing impact, the nails that held the bolts and hinges ripped out of the frame just as Rachel had predicted. Two soldiers, the perimeter-men, leaned in and looked up and around for traps, then came forward to guard the doorway. A third, the one who had whittled by the fire, headed down the aisle to take up position in front of the main church door, knocking a signal on it as he arrived.

So, none of the alternative schemes Rachel had considered would have been any use. Hiding by the side door and waiting for them all to run in past her wouldn't have worked, and neither would dashing out the main door as they came in from the side. Clearly at least one of the soldiers had been standing outside the front door until he heard his companion's knock from within.

The whittling man had slipped very briefly on the holy water she'd spilt in the aisle, though, which had given Rachel one tiny jot of satisfaction.

A satisfaction that was ruined when their leader strolled in and spotted her immediately. He had not yet drawn his sword, but his mere presence was intimidating, and when his eyes locked onto Rachel's, the chill to her stomach was as painful as if she'd swallowed a nugget of ice.

They swaggered toward her, the gangling boy to his leader's right and the smiling man to his left, much taller and broader than they had appeared from the steeple. Church-fillingly immense men.

Rachel set fire to one of the prayer books, but it looked pathetic even to her own eyes. She dropped it into the empty font where its pages sizzled on contact with the drops of water that remained. The soldiers watched with interest. As yet, nobody had said a word.

She raised the stick like a lance. The laughing man laughed.

As if this had been the signal, they ran at her all at once, the door guards leaving their posts and sprinting pell-mell down the aisles just as the three in the vanguard stormed Rachel's pitiful defenses. She shrieked and lashed out with the pole; the leader deflected it with ease, grabbing the shaft with his gloved hand. She let go before he

could yank on it and unbalance her, and scooped up the burning prayer book. No one even bothered to avoid that, and it glanced off the laughing man's breastplate and fell to the floor, spitting sparks. Then their gauntlets landed on the font, dragging it out and away. The cross fell to the floor, and Rachel turned and fled up the spiral stairs.

She had a good start, and fear lent her wings, but even so she made it only halfway up before an arm swept her legs out from under her. She fell heavily.

If Rachel had reached the window at the steeple's peak she would have faced two stark choices: defend herself using only splinters of glass, or leap to her death. Perhaps it's as well that she was not forced to decide.

The leader dragged her downstairs and handed her off to the smiling man and the youth. The smiling man immediately let go of her arm and left it to the boy to secure her, whereupon Rachel got in three good punches to the boy's nose and cheek before he got a tight enough grip on her forearms to quell her.

Rachel howled like a stuck pig. Not from fear or rage, for she had no space in her brain for either. Rather, this: if the only damage she could do was to their ears, she'd scream all night.

The whittling soldier thumped her in the face, closing her mouth with a snap. They seized her legs and hoisted her to head height, and all at once Rachel was being carried out of the church on her back like a sack of grain, passing through the doorway and out of sanctuary.

After the mold and stifle of the church the night air smelled heart-achingly fresh and autumn sweet.

"You did well, Rachel," she said to the skies. "None could have done better." From below came a scornful laugh.

She looked down. The boy was taking the weight of her shoulders, while Whittling and Smiling carried a leg apiece. The perimeter men were out on the flanks of the group, naturally enough. The leader must be bringing up the rear, because she couldn't see him.

Something bumped against her stomach. Looking along her body she saw the Hand, gripping her belt. It must have somehow fallen off the font and gotten itself hooked on her.

Beyond that, she saw the solders' cloaks draped on the ground by the fire, and even further out, a shallow grave scraped at the edge of the woods.

So much for her waning hopes that they'd just bind and hobble her and carry her off to face witchcraft charges after all. Truly, she was not important enough for that. There would be no tribunal for Rachel, and no tomorrow. Just a harsh using, and then death. An icy calm descended upon her. What was left? Where were her choices?

The soldiers eased Rachel down onto the cloaks by the fire, and it began. But not as they anticipated.

Plead? Beg? Never.

Holding her aloft in a gloved hand that felt like steel around her calf, the smiling man reached up with his other hand to squeeze her thigh, as if appraising fruit at the market.

The Hand stared at her. Even with no eyes, the focus of its attention was clear. In the early moonlight, in the approaching firelight, Rachel peered back at it as well as she could from half a body-length away.

Ridiculous.

Rachel looked at its knuckles and joints, and with what was left of her rapidly dissolving presence of mind, marveled that anyone could possibly have mistaken such a feminine-looking hand for that of St. Stephan.

Was *anything* in the church genuine?

—The saint exploded into her brain, then, on the precise instant the soldiers carried Rachel off consecrated ground. The arrival of the saint was not subtle but large and terrible and rending, and in those moments of awful recognition Rachel dreaded Stephan far more deeply than she feared these tawdry, foolish soldiers who planned to violate and bury her.

Stephan changed everything. Stephan was lightning in her limbs, thunder in her head.

The soldiers eased Rachel down onto the cloaks by the fire, and it began. But not as they anticipated.

"Who are you?" shouted Rachel, as her hands closed around the first man's throat and crushed the life from it. The Hand that still hung from her waist gave a reply, but not in any language the soldiers could hear, its power curling into her brain like fingernails.

The second death of St. Stephan, born Stephanie Cutter in a village not so very different from Rachel's, had been by disemboweling. Now the soldier who whittled met a thrust from his own sword, snatched out of its sheath by Rachel, and fell screaming and staring in anguish at his own intestines as they slumped out onto the grass in front of him.

The third death of Stephan, no saint by any sane definition, involved being ripped into pieces, and the less said about the fate of the perimeter guard who joined the melee at that moment the better.

She smashed their leader's limbs and threw him onto the fire, and in dying he at last broke his silence.

That left only the laughing man, and the boy.

Rachel stood, sword in hand, as the Hand of St. Stephan tumbled off her belt and landed at her feet, its power spent.

Horrified at her brutal mutilation of these men, Rachel screamed and threw the sword away. Her heart was hot and full, pumping the blood around her body in a flurry of beats per second.

Saint Stephan was out of her system. Yet right in front of her was a man who had treated her like a side of beef just seconds before, a man whose laughter would have rung in her ears as they humiliated her, had it gone according to the soldiers' plan.

Rachel went for him under her own steam, rage filling her.

He smiled no longer; his roar of anger boomed out at the same time his fist slammed her backwards onto the ground. He leapt on her and seized her hair, and Rachel saw his wicked studded gauntlet rise up all the way to the stars and begin its long fall down toward her face.

The sword-tip that bloomed out of his stomach almost reached far enough to skewer Rachel as well, but did not. The soldier's look of surprise lasted an eternity. His gauntlet never landed. His weight drifted off her body, leaving only air above her, and all Rachel heard was the rush of blood in her veins and a terrible gurgle that was part cackle and part wail. Whip-smart though she was, it took her ten full seconds to understand that the tawny-haired lad had stabbed the smiling man in the back, then pulled him away and dispatched him with a savage slash to the throat.

Rachel rolled into a crouch and vomited. A few feet away, the boy did the same.

Like a fire rekindling, the scarlet haze of violence surged anew in Rachel's brain, the sick desire to mutilate and tear.

The boy stumbled toward her. "Are you all right? Is it... Are you...?"

"Stay *away!*" she shouted, fighting the impulse to batter him, rend him, rip him into tiny globules of flesh. The Hand curled and flexed on the ground. Rachel seized it and the bloody curtain in her mind grew thicker and even more vile. She took a step away from the boy, and another, and gradually it got easier.

Rachel walked to the door of the Church of St. Stephan, and threw in His Hand. It bounced and skittered across the flagstones, still squirming, leaving a trail of new blood in its wake.

She backed away, and went to the boy.

"WHAT DID I DO?" SAID RACHEL, aghast. The boy shuddered and said nothing.

St. Stephan was hung, drawn, quartered, and burned. That must have been a lot to bear, even for the hero of a nation. Add to that a century of powerless incarceration within the church, and those feelings of murderous vengeance must have swelled and multiplied. A few prayers to her in a subtly disguised Lady Chapel wouldn't have done much to ease that.

And hence these devastated bodies, which Rachel felt not at all tempted to inspect or dismantle further. She knew enough about what was under these men's skins. She needed no more details of the human condition. Rachel's days of dissection were over.

For a while.

Rachel walked to the door of the Church of St. Stephan, and threw in His Hand.

"Stephan was a woman," Rachel explained, much later. By now she and Julian had dragged the remains of the other five soldiers off to the shallow grave intended for Rachel, and built up the fire again. Dawn was only a few scant hours away. "No one knew. All those years she traveled and rallied the lords against the freebooters. All the deals she arranged, the treaties and the feasts, the politics. Pretending she was a man. Always wearing gloves, I'd wager. So, of course, at the end, when the lords found out how they'd been duped—"

"Hush," said Julian uncomfortably, which was mostly what he'd done so far: beg her to stop, to avoid putting into words the remorseless truths that couldn't be taken back once spoken.

"They had to build the church *around* what was left of her, to contain her rage. It was the only way to finally subdue her—"

"But what of us, now?" Julian interrupted.

Rachel had been thinking about that, too. "If anyone asks, I'll say you died here with the others. All right? And you'll do the same for me."

Taking a horse should be safe enough, if she stripped off the military saddle and rode with a blanket like the common folk did. Who was to know? Who was to follow? Perhaps she was delivering the horse somewhere, to the city, maybe. Rachel was a blacksmith's daughter. She had the gab to carry it off.

"I thought we might ride together," he said, looking into the fire. "Brother and sister. Draw less suspicion."

Rachel studied his blunt, honest fingers. It was tempting to accept his company, and under most circumstances it would be safer. But Julian was now an army deserter. Sooner or later someone would recognize him and he'd probably be blamed for the other soldiers' deaths. Rachel could do nothing about that, short of confessing to the crimes herself.

"Our paths lie separately," she said. "Let's be far from here by noon, in opposite directions."

He nodded. Rachel marveled that she'd made a man do her bidding so simply, till she realized the look in his eyes was relief, not regret.

At dawn the boy was still fussing with the fire as Rachel climbed aboard the best-shod of the horses and put the Church of St. Stephan behind her. She could not resist urging the horse into a canter for at least the first mile.

She was not running away, she reasoned, but towards.

For the first time in Rachel's life, her future was in her own hands.

And so, it began. ❧

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HALLOWEEN:

Comprising a Cautionary Acrostic of Nine Bedtime Stories for Reading to the Tiresome or Disobedient Child

by Euan Harvey

To Jack Slay, Jr., with respect. (And apologies.)

H IS FOR HUGH, whose father sits on a pine bench in the mall, looking down and smiling as Hugh's head appears between his legs. Hugh slides out from under the bench, gurgles laughter, then rushes round to begin again. He wobbles around the plastic fern at the end of the bench, then flops on his belly and squirms underneath. Heels click on the tiles, and Hugh's father looks up to see his neighbor Mrs. Wait smiling at him. They grin, sharing a moment of quiet complicity—the Waits have two boys, Andrew and David—but then Hugh makes a nasty little slobbering noise, and his legs start to kick.

"Stop that, Hugh," his father says automatically, but Hugh doesn't stop, and in a sudden and horrid flash of understanding, the father realizes it isn't Hugh making the slobbering noise because Hugh is whimpering like he does when he's having a nightmare. Mrs. Wait claps her hand to her mouth in silent horror and she points to something under the bench. Hugh's father lunges for his son's legs, but before he can reach them they vanish in a lightning quick *swoosh,* as if something very large and very strong has dragged Hugh underneath. Hugh's father drops to his knees, stares under the bench, heart trip-thumping and eyes wide as the adrenaline hits him like a freight train—but Hugh has vanished forever and there is nothing underneath except scuffed tile and a single, glistening drop of ruby.

A IS FOR ANDREW, who is thinking about Halloween costumes and wishing that he'd listened to his brother. They'd made a big group, Andrew and his younger brother David, and David's friend Liam, and then some high school kids, and Lucy, dressed as a witch with black lipstick and sticky-out hair, smiled at Andrew and said he looked cute. They met more kids on Flatbush Road, then more and more, until half the town's kids were all in one big laughing Halloween group. Andrew kept sneaking glances at Lucy, and blushing when she caught him looking and she smiled. So when David wanted to go home, Andrew wouldn't go, and when David pulled on Andrew's sleeve, some of the big kids pushed David away. David fell over and started to sniffle, and though Andrew felt bad, he laughed with the others. David shouted something as Andrew left, but he couldn't hear it properly.

Mrs. Wait claps her hand to her mouth in silent horror and she points to something under the bench.

Now, though, Andrew is wondering what David yelled, because Andrew hasn't seen Lucy for a long time. In fact, Andrew doesn't recognize *any* of the kids in his group, and he feels nervous about the smell, and the sly way they look at him, and the way they jostle him to keep him in the center of the group so he can't (escape) see where they're going, and he's especially nervous about their costumes, which are like the ones in movies where you see dead people walking around with their skin all pale and blotchy and ripped open like wet paper to show the bones and meat inside. And that's strange, because although their costumes are like the ones in movies, their masks are cheap and plastic. But some of the kids must be wearing other masks underneath, because the guy walking (lurching) next to Andrew has a second mask under the first with a big hole in its cheek and Andrew can see the kid's back teeth and his tongue like a fat black slug. Andrew can hear a whistling sound as the kid breathes, and there's a glistening dribble of saliva running out of the hole in the kid's mask.

The kid keeps looking at Andrew, teeth and saliva glistening through the gap in his second mask, and his eyes are just black pits.

L IS FOR LIAM, who lies in his bed with his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling and trying not to listen to the sounds coming from under his bed. He knows that Daddy says there's no monsters down there—but Liam knows Daddy is wrong. And Liam thinks that now Daddy knows he was wrong, too. Seven minutes ago—and Liam knows *exactly* how long, because he's been watching the slow-ticking clock with its soft-glowing hands—Daddy came into Liam's room demanding to know why Liam was crying. When Liam told him about the crocodile under the bed, Daddy's face got very red and his fists clenched, and then he knelt down and picked up the edge of the blanket that hung over the dark space under the bed, and peered down and said, "Look, there's no Goddamn monsters! 'Kay? Look!"

And then the crocodile's long and toothy jaws crunched closed on Daddy's head and pulled him under the bed.

L IS FOR LUCY, back early from trick or treating. Her parents have gone to stay with Grandma, taking her annoying younger brother Oliver with them. Lucy's on her own for the rest of the night, and she's called Will, her boyfriend, and told him to get round here. She's thinking maybe she'll let him get to second base tonight. She's brushing her hair, and her phone beeps cheerily at her. She picks it up, sees she has a new message from Will. When she opens it, she sees a photograph; blurry, it shows a vaguely familiar street, streetlights reflecting orange on the rain-slicked sidewalk. Lucy squints at the photograph. If this is a joke, she thinks, it's kind of lame.

A few minutes later, her phone beeps again. It's another photograph, only this time Lucy recognizes the street. It's Franklin, and she's looking at her house; security lights making haloes in the rain. But something's subtly wrong with it, distorted. After a moment, Lucy works it out—the photograph is taken from too low, like someone's crawling on their belly to snap it.

Lucy smiles. Will's playing one of his games. Last time, he snuck inside

wearing a ski mask and threatened her with a plastic gun. She laughed so hard she nearly peed herself.

The next comes a moment later. Now, Will's inside the house—he knows where the spare key is—and the camera is looking up the stairs. The perspective is all skewed, and the banisters on the stairs look like the bars of a cage. Lucy can't stop smiling now, and she listens carefully, but Will's being *very* quiet. The next photo is looking down the hallway outside Lucy's room. Will's turned the light off, and the orange streetlamp shines through the window at the end of the hall, casting long shadows.

Lucy puts down her hairbrush. She looks in the mirror, smiles. There's a hot little twist of excitement in her belly. Maybe it'll be third base.

Will's just in the hall; she can hear him creeping toward the door.

Her phone rings. Without looking at it, Lucy picks it up.

"Hi!" Will says.

Outside, he shuffles a little closer to her door.

"Aren't you coming in to get me?" Lucy asks. *Definitely* third base.

The handle of her door turns slowly.

Will laughs. "Give me five minutes, okay? I'm on my way now. Couldn't find my phone, I think someone's stolen it."

He says something else, but Lucy doesn't hear as her phone drops from her nerveless fingers and the door to her bedroom swings slowly open.

O IS FOR OLIVER, who wakes in Grandma's house and wants a glass of water, so he crawls from his bed, rubbing his eyes, and walks to the top of the stairs, where he stops suddenly, clutching at his pajamas. Because instead of the familiar hallway with the sodium-orange light shining in through the leaded pane of the front door, now the stairs go down and down into a thick and watchful blackness far below. The ground floor of Grandma's house has gone, swallowed whole and slipped down the gullet of the stairs. They pull at Oliver's gaze, dragging it down the endless flight with one riser after another. And as they worm down toward the waiting gloom, the stairs change: neat and familiar and carpeted at the top, but slowly the carpet becomes more and more threadbare, until it is only threads, and then it's nothing at all, and the sweaty black stone underneath looks oily in the dim light. And as the carpet shrinks, the stairs swell: wider, taller, until they're not stairs but great ill-cut slabs of rock that only a giant could climb—and perhaps that is closer to the truth than Oliver wants, because far below, something is moving, something flabby and pale and swollen like a pig's belly, something that is pulling itself painfully up the vast and sweat-slick steps. It hauls itself onto a riser, and though it is dwarfed by the enormity of the step, Oliver knows that really it is very, very large, and very, very hungry.

But Will is sixteen, and big for his age, and he's seen this movie, so all at once his terror snaps him into movement and he punches the mirror, shattering it into sharp-edged shards and breaking two fingers on his right hand.

It looks up, and where the thing's face should be there are only greasy locks of ropy hair that slither together like worms.

W IS FOR WILL, who looks into the bathroom mirror and sees a reflection that isn't the bathroom. His mouth snaps shut (teeth go *click*); a dribble of toothpaste runs unnoticed down from his white-ringed mouth and collects on his chin.

The mirror shows a gloomy space, low-ceilinged and cluttered. A green-tinged fluorescent buzzes angrily in the distance. Metal tables march in rows into the shadows. They bear shrouded burdens, blood-stained sheets draped over horribly *reduced* forms. From the nearest, an arm has fallen from under the sheet; diminished and dolorous, it sags toward the floor. All that remains of the arm: thin sliver of flesh, one finger, thumb, wet gleam of bone. A bar of light slices into the gloom; Will realizes dimly that it's the light from the bathroom, shining *through* the mirror and into this other place.

In the distance, something shuffles forward into the light, emerging from the shadow like a moth from a cocoon. It holds its arms out in front of it; one hand gropes blindly, the other clutches an object that gleams steel in the light. Something pale that might be bandages flutters from its flesh.

Will gasps—a small sound, but the bandaged thing hears. It swivels jerkily so it faces the light and now Will can see the pale and bloody bandages that swathe its face tightly and the crimson-spattered white coat it wears. The hands flex and clutch, grasping at air. It cocks its head to one side, *listening*.

Will doesn't breathe. Terror grips him and his breath turns to glue. He doesn't dare move. The thing stays motionless. But then Will blinks, and the thing's ears must be sharp as razors for it hears the soft *bat* of eyelids and it lurches forward, moving in jerky quick time toward the mirror and Will, reaching for him with bloody fingers from which strips of bandage flutter, and in its other hand, light glints from something sharp.

But Will is sixteen, and big for his age, and he's seen this movie, so all at once his terror snaps him into movement and he punches the mirror, shattering it into sharp-edged shards and breaking two fingers on his right hand. The fragments of mirror crash down, snapping as they hit the sink, the tiled floor. Will stares down at them, blood dripping from his hand, toothpaste dripping from his mouth. But he sees nothing in the reflected shards but his own face.

Drip, drip goes the blood from Will's hand. He looks at it, dimly realizes through the cotton-fog of adrenaline that he has to stop the bleeding. He needs...*bandages*. He turns, opens the bathroom door, but outside, the hallway is gone, and the light from the bathroom shines through the doorway and into a gloomy, cluttered space where metal tables march into darkness and a green-tinged fluorescent buzzes angrily and bloody sheets shroud unmoving bodies that are horridly *incomplete*.

The flayed thing stands in the doorway, bandaged with strips of its own skin, bloody flesh peeking from underneath, the stink of formaldehyde sharp in Will's nose. Blood stains its medical jacket: crimson overlapping carmine. And now Will can see what it is holding—a scalpel—and as he realizes what that means he steps backward, but he bumps into the sink behind him and there's nowhere to run.

The scalpel gleams. Sharp, sharp.

E IS FOR EM, who has locked the door to the bathroom and is happily ignoring her father's muffled complaints. After all, he's *old,* and she's got a party to go to, and Lucy said Will's friend Nathan might be there, and Nathan's cute. But as Em (Emily only to her parents) steps out of the shower and reaches for the towel, she hears a scratching noise from the drain behind her. Mouth turning down in a moue of disgust—is it a rat?—Em wraps the soft, white towel around her and peers into the shower stall, where condensation beads on the salmon-pink tiles and rivulets of water trickle down the off-white grouting to swirl into the drain. The scratching noise comes again—*crik, crik*—and it's not a rat, Em thinks; it sounds like a fingernail on concrete, not the papery *skritch* of rat or mouse claws.

There's a cough: deep and clotted and gurgly—but it's a cough; there's no mistaking it. Em turns to stare, but there's only the drain and the dripping water.

It *was* a cough. She wasn't dreaming.

Crik, crik.

Em takes a half-step forward, back into the shower stall. Soap slicks the tiles; water drips. Now Em can hear a distant wheezing, in and out like the sea. She stares down at the drain, but she can't see anything; there's only the little black holes of the trap where Em's hair clogs in black tangles.

Crik, crik. Wheeze.

Too weird, Em thinks, and she bends down and picks out a clot of hair from the trap, pulling a face at how *gross* it is. But as she reaches for the next clot, the trap *pings* up in the air, flips twice, then lands with a merry little tinkle on the tiles. And now Em can see down the drain, and what she sees at first is nothing, just a round black hole, but then something glistening and wet slides underneath. First white, then black: a circle which pulls back, contracts, and Em realizes it's an eye and it's looking at her—and it's *huge*.

Nathan tries to open his eyes, but they're gummed shut by something, and he has to peel them open with clumsy fingers, like peeling off a scab.

She steps back, but before she can run, a thick-knuckled finger—because that's all that will fit—pokes out of the drain, braces, then yanks downward. The salmon-pink tiles shatter and one-half of the shower floor falls away, and Em watches, frozen, as the tiles tumble into treacle-thick gloom, bouncing off the leathery hide of the thing that was hiding underneath and that is now reaching for her with meaty hands and its mouth is gaping wide and its teeth are like stones.

E IS FOR EDWARD, who sits on his seat on the school bus and looks out of the window at the naked limbs of the trees as they claw at the sky. He doesn't turn around, even though his friend James is whispering from the seat next to him. Let's skip school, James is saying in his throaty whisper. Let's go do something fun. Come on. Don't be a wuss. I've got something to show you.

James says this every day. He waits for Edward on the bus—it goes past James' parents' house first—and when Edward gets on, James plucks at Edward's sleeve with his thin fingers and whispers in Edward's ear that they should go off and do something, that he's got something to show Edward. None of the other kids on the bus pays attention to James, and Edward tries not to either—not that he needs any encouragement to do that. James smells bad.

And so, when the bus arrives at the school and the doors *hish* open, Edward gets up from his seat, ignoring James' plucking fingers, and he walks to the door and gets off the bus and tries not to think about the car smash that killed James more than a year ago.

N IS FOR NATHAN, who wakes up slowly, swimming up through layers of unconsciousness like the sea-bloated corpse of a drowned man rising from the depths. His mouth is dry, and his skin feels sticky and grimy, like it gets after he's been playing in the sun for too long. Nathan tries to open his eyes, but they're gummed shut by something, and he has to peel them open with clumsy fingers, like peeling off a scab.

It's day, and the light shines in through Nathan's bedroom window. And his bedroom is a mess: clothes scattered in heaps over the floor, closet door open, posters peeling away from the walls like strips of skin.

Nathan sits up, and the movement makes his head spin. He clutches the side of his head, and realizes he can't remember. Something's missing...and why is he here in the day? Wasn't there a party? With who? He should be in school, and if he isn't there, Miss Resnick's going to get mad again. For a moment, a memory surfaces: something red, biting, and teeth—but then it's gone, slipped under the black waves that are beating inside Nathan's head.

Nathan looks down at his hands. The skin is waxy. It reminds him of something, but he can't remember what.

There's a scream from outside his window. Nathan stares at his hands. The screamer screams again, and this time it penetrates the muzziness in Nathan's head. He lurches to his feet and stumbles to the window. The room is spinning around him, and his body seems slow and clumsy, like he's drunk—but he doesn't *feel* drunk, not hungover, just…dislocated.

Outside, a car burns in the road. It's upside down, flames licking at the tires, smoke coiling from the windows. A man lies in the road. He's spread-eagled in a comic-book pose of death. A dark liquid pools around him. The screaming is coming from a woman further up the road, outside the Waits' house. She's crawling, dragging one leg behind her. A man watches her. There's something wrong with his head. It looks bashed-in on one side, and dried blood has crusted over his shoulder. As Nathan watches, the man staggers toward the screaming woman. When he reaches her, he opens his mouth wide, then bites deep into her leg. Her blood is very red.

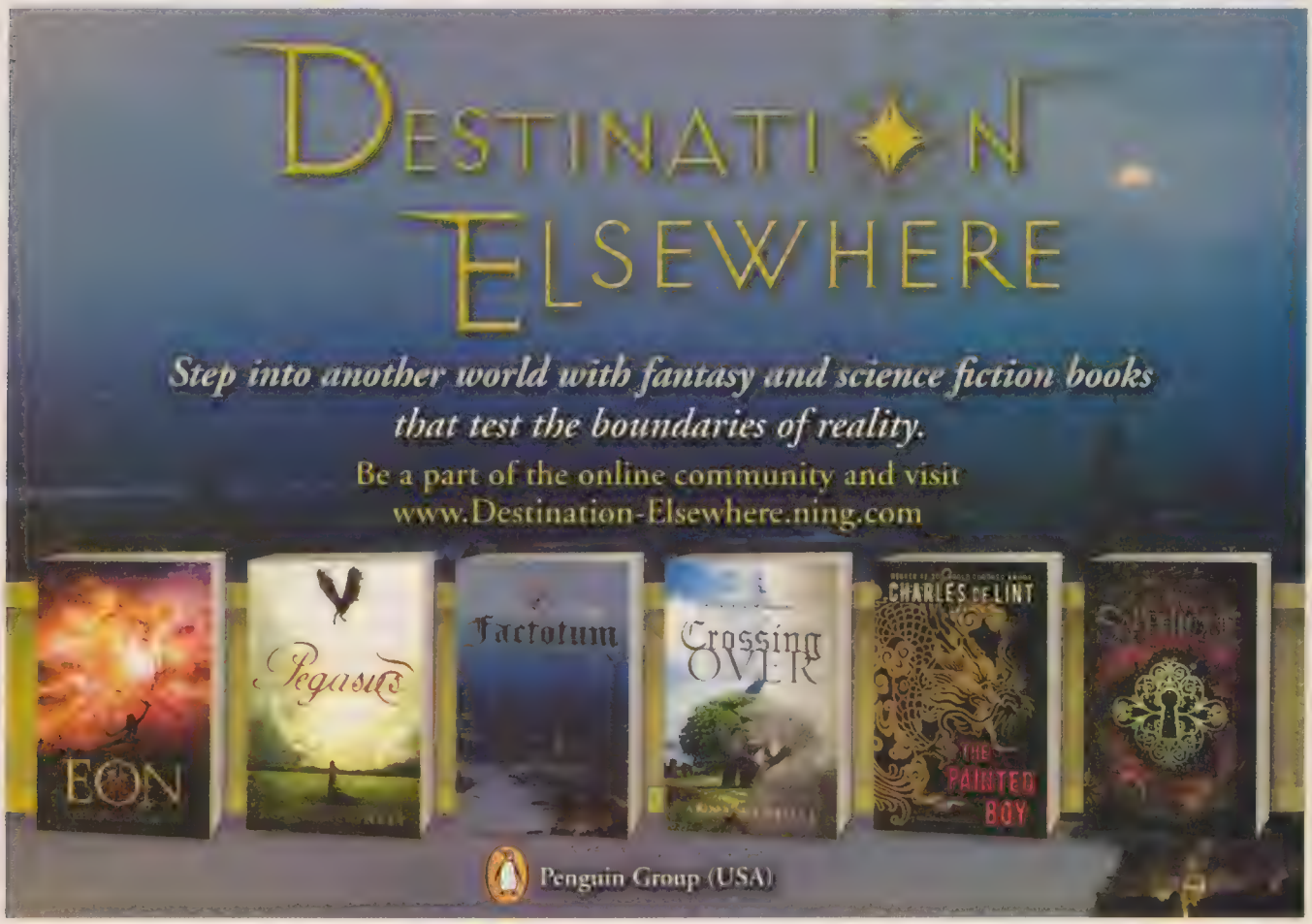
Outside, a car burns in the road. It's upside down, flames licking at the tires, smoke coiling from the windows.

Nathan watches impassively. He wonders if he should be scared, but it isn't like people anymore; it's like watching Discovery Channel when the lion pulls down the zebra, and there's blood and the legs kick quickly, quickly, slowly, slower, stop. The meat, red and glistening, with the bones poking white toward the sky.

Black waves beat inside Nathan's head. He turns, staggers out of his room, downstairs. Someone has nailed boards across the windows and front door. Light shines through in bars. The TV blares from the living room. When Nathan pushes open the door, he sees his father slumped on the couch, snoring. His face is drawn, purple shadows under his eyes. Beside him rests his shotgun. A box of shells sits on the couch. On the TV, a well-groomed young man with panic gnawing at the edges of his voice is advising people to stay indoors until the emergency is over. But Nathan is not listening to the TV; he is watching the pulse in his father's neck, the flutter and throb of blood.

And as the black water in his mind turns crimson and thick, Nathan begins to drool. ❧

Euan Harvey is a writer, wargamer, and role-player. He lives in the UK with his three children: naughty, naughtier, and naughtiest. He uses them to fear-test his stories.



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Mad, Bad, & Dangerous: The Androgyne

by SatyrPhil Brucato

See these eyes so red
Red like jungle burning bright
Those who feel me near
Pull their blinds and change their minds
—David Bowie, *"Cat People (Putting Out Fire)"*

WHO ELSE COULD PORTRAY THE GOBLIN King? David Bowie's status as the High Avatar of Twentieth-Century Genderfuck made him the natural choice to personify Jareth, the sinister lord of *Labyrinth*. It's a fitting role for an artist who's been a vampire, a shapechanger, and various forms of alien. Regardless of *Labyrinth*'s kid-friendly tone, Bowie's seductive presence lends the film a sinister allure. Literally glamour-us, he struts the haunted landscape of the Androgyne...and, as always, he does so with style.

Despite his male moniker, the Goblin King isn't really masculine. Like many fey entities, he slips along a liminal space between Male and Female identities—the realm of the *Androgyne*, a walking paradox who literally is both man (*andro*) and woman (*gyn*) and yet is neither. Existing beyond conventional roles of sex or gender, this figure confounds easy definition. As a result, s/he—even the pronoun becomes unclear—throws people off-balance. Folks don't know whether to feel attracted to the Androgyne's prettiness or repulsed by that figure's otherness. Consequently, they often feel both. As Bowie himself sang in "Rebel Rebel," they're "*not sure if you're a boy or a girl...*" and hence, they're not sure what to do with you at all.

Such uncertainty is scarily attractive. In its presence, shadows grow. Throughout this column's "Mad, Bad, & Dangerous" series, I've explored various *tempter archetypes*—those uncanny figures who, in art and life, reveal our conflicted feelings about sexual behavior, gender roles, inner power, and external influence. Personifying the *shadow* as described by Carl Gustav Jung, a tempter archetype embodies forbidden urges and disturbing aspects of the individual and collective Self. Mapping the dark triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathology, such figures become erotic predators we cherish yet abhor. We want them, fear them, and sometimes become them. They're our vampires and succubi, the sirens on our shores, and the Big Bad Wolves of our deep, dark woods. Tempters exist to outrage propriety, and none are more outrageous than the Androgyne.

Like the Temptress and the Demon Lover, the Androgyne archetype is voraciously seductive and eternally compelling—a walking cliff from which some folks can't resist jumping. Wounded children, like the outcasts of Caitlín R. Kiernan's *Silk*, Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*, or Ross Campbell's *The Abandoned*, find themselves drawn by the Androgyne's "fuck it" allure. In their fatalistic hands, gender tears away, as worthless and disposable as fast-food wrappers. Inevitably, these souls fall...but burn bright all the way down.

Simply by existing, the Androgyne forces people to confront their preconceptions. Folks with firm expectations about gender roles feel poleaxed by figures who exist beyond both. Years

Saint Joan of Arc—Joan of Arc donned the garb of men and led the French armies to inspring victories in the 1400s

ago, I shared dinner at the World Horror Convention with a few fellow authors. Our group included three rather androgynous friends, and our waiter treated us like a pack of freaks. Eventually, we called the manager and complained about said waiter's attitude. Reprimanded at our table, the server pointed at one of us, insisting "That's a *MAN!*" even though the clearly feminine author was a guest of honor at that very hotel. I don't know what eventually happened to the waiter, but the fact that our mere presence (at a horror writers convention, no less!) inspired such behavior testifies to the extreme reactions people have to androgyny.

(As for pronouns, the jury's still out about the proper term for an androgynous person. Many writers who deal in gender-fluid subjects employ the term *hir*, while others use *s/he*, *har*, *zir*, *they*, or the blunt object *shim*. A few older authors still use the even ruder *it*, and most simply employ the person's name without any pronoun at all. In the case of a person who expresses a definite gender identity, though, the proper pronoun is the one that person prefers...a point our waiter should have observed!)

"You...you are unnatural!" She turned from me disgustedly, and disappeared. The breath flew from me like a bird from its cage.

— Herculine, rejected by her lover in James Reese's *The Book of Shadows*

In real life, people who blur gender lines often endure fascination and abuse. Not long ago, they were circus freaks and court jesters, shamans and pariahs, and often all of them at once. These days, social etiquette has largely replaced open hostility with bemused tolerance; even so, there's a ragged edge between acceptance and abuse. As the murder of Brandon Teena reveals, an androgynous human being lives just one or two steps between glamorous legend and crime statistic.

In the realm of archetypes, the Androgyne Tempter inhabits a complex intersection of transvestitism, castration, intersexuality, transsexuality, genderqueering, hermaphrodism, and all manner of gender ambiguity. It's this last element—ambiguity—that fuels the enduring yet unnerving appeal of such figures. As both an archetype and a living being, an androgynous person transcends "normal" gender polarities, representing boundless sexual potential. The wide array of clinical definitions applied to such people and practices reflects the indefinable nature of androgyny. Folks keep trying to put labels on it but, like the faeries so often portrayed as androgynous, androgyny transcends labels through its very existence. Is it any wonder, then, that effeminate men—gay and otherwise—are so often called "fairies"?

Although commonly depicted as a feminine man, the Androgyne may also be a masculine woman. Symbolically or even literally "endowed," s/he challenges men on their own turf. Weapon-wielding Amazons, guitar-wielding riot grrrls, and dildo-wielding

Frank N. Furtur from the Rocky Horror Picture Show

dominatrixes all employ their "instruments" with a confident precision that puts insecure men to shame. Sometimes, that's a bloody line to cross. The vicious fates inflicted upon real and legendary Amazons show how threatened guys can feel when masculinity itself is redefined.

Human beings suffer for the sins of legends. This is especially true among androgynous people. Many cultures, the United States included, cite the reputed "corruption of youth" as a compelling reason to deny rights, safety, and even life itself to gay and transsexual citizens. In such cases, absurdly grotesque folklore—like the various urban legends in which David Bowie/Alice Cooper/Iggy Pop/Marilyn Manson has gallons of sperm pumped from his stomach—outweighs the very real pain inflicted upon people who cannot or will not live within gender boundaries.

In any form, our Androgyne is literally transgressive. *Trans* means "across, beyond or through," while *gradi* means "to step." This act of "stepping beyond" carries connotations of sin and disobedience, not only of social norms but of divinity as well. A mural from Pompeii reveals the lusty god Pan turning away in horror from the revealed genitals of a hermaphrodite, while the biblical laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy declare cross-dressing and homosexual behaviors to be "abominations..." that is, "bad omens" that must be prayed away, driven off, or destroyed. Personified through a living threshold, the Androgyne's transgression defies social orders, forcing other, more "normal" people to confront questions of their own place in such order.

Despite the innate beauty of androgyny, that confrontation can have ugly results. In the 2010 biopic *The Runaways*, Cherie Currie (Dakota Fanning) dons David Bowie drag for her high-school talent show. The view pans across her classmates—shocked, amused, aroused, enraged. They boo her, pelt her, drive her offstage. Later, when Currie teams up with butch Joan Jett (*Twilight*'s Kristen Stewart) and three other rocker-girls, their aggressively pansexual manager Kim Fowley (Michael Shannon) has local boys throw dog shit at them. Still later, as they become superstars, the adulation of their fans becomes equally unhinged. Fame, fascination, outrage, even violence—in life and legend, this is the Androgyne's lot. Transgression shatters everyday life, and nothing in its wake remains unchanged.

While the Seductress and Demon Lover inspire secret sins, the Androgyne provokes open rebellion. The mysterious cataclysm of Storm Constantine's Wraeththu series doesn't just turn men into hermaphrodites—it destroys human life as we know it. Once Brad and Janet meet Dr. Frank N. Furter and his transsexual Transylvanians from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, "nothing can ever be the same." The mad KISS figures on the cover of *Destroyer* dance on the ruins of their world. Every archetype is a gatekeeper of transformation, but the Androgyne may weave the most awe-filled seductions of all.

> *It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary? Does my other half have what I don't? Did he get the looks? The luck? The love? Were we really separated forcibly or did he just run off with the good stuff? Or did I? Will this person embarrass me? What about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again?*
> — Hedwig (John Cameron Mitchell), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

It's no accident that this archetype exploded into popular view within living memory. The last century has seen transformations unmatched by any other period in history. What better avatar could there be for an age when boundaries of beauty, sex, technology, and culture fall? The Androgyne is more than simply a contradiction of genders; as J. Gordon Melton points out in *The Vampire Book:* "androgyny (is) an ideal of wholeness in which one part of a duality encompasses its opposite. Androgyny can be said to exist when light accepts darkness or pleasure recognizes the role of pain, but is most commonly presented as individuals blur the social distinctions between what is masculine and feminine." Duality folds when confronted with androgyny, forcing people to see unity in difference. Like my friend at the dinner table, androgyny forces people to accept a larger world.

In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, when social conventions were scrapped by the truckload, androgyny became fashionable...and all too often, violent. Hippies, Punks, Goths, Glams, and Gays all laid siege to gender propriety. In response, they were elevated and excoriated in patterns that continue even to this day. While rock deities like Bowie and The Beatles became superstars, cops beat long-haired men and short-haired women who "forgot their place." Bands like Twisted

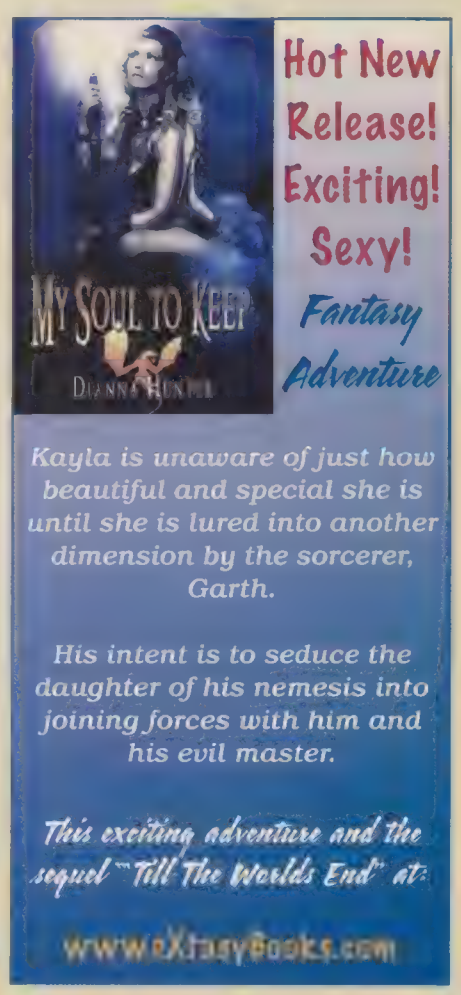
Sister and The Damned brawled with members of their own audiences for the right to dress "queer," and heavy metal icon Rob Halford (whose band, Judas Priest, popularized gay fetish gear among grimly hetero metalheads) infuriated fans by ditching his closet in the early 1990s. A heady brew of fashions and fantasies boiled throughout popular culture, popping out phantasms like Klaus Nomi and Alice Cooper, *Female Troubles* and *Liquid Sky*, Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles and Richard O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*. Countering the stern heteronormalcy of Buck Rogers or Professor Tolkien, artists like Kenneth Anger, Clive Barker, and Genesis P-Orridge bent magical intentions through their fantasy creations. And as the Sexual Revolution and AIDS panic rushed through popular culture in the 1980s and '90s, the undergrounds of science fiction/fantasy and sexual fetishism—entwined, since their beginnings, in covert ways—embraced one another openly. This revolt enshrined the Androgyne in postmodern fantasy and science fiction. To quote the title of an award-winning series of queer phantasia, it's been "Bending the Landscape" into a literal fairy-land of androgynous transgression.

Yet despite this recent popularity, the Androgyne boasts an ancient pedigree. Long before KISS strapped on their "seven inch...leather heels," androgynous beings swept through the shadows of mythology. Angels, though given masculine identities, are usually portrayed as uncanny androgynes. Demons often display characteristics of both sexes, especially in medieval demonologies like Johann Weyer's *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* (itself an elaborate satire on obsessive social hierarchies). Shinto kami nature-spirits frequently appear with similar ambiguity, occupying a midpoint between human genders that transcends the limitations of both.

According to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, humanity itself began as "children of the sun, moon, and earth...man, woman and the union of the two...and the man was the child of the sun, and the woman of the moon, and the man-woman of the moon, which is made up of the sun and earth... Terrible was their strength, and the thoughts in their hearts were great." Four-armed and four-legged people born back-to-back, these creatures were sundered "like sorb apples" when they defied the gods. Similar rabbinical myths portray Adam and Lilith (or Eve) as being formed back-to-back and then cut apart as the Lord passed his hand between them. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad describes its Primal Androgyne to be "the same size and kind as a man and woman closely embracing," while certain Greek myths declare that Prometheus created men and women as joined entities who were then ripped in half by jealous Zeus. Regardless of the gods in question, these tales explain why we poor mortals spend so much of our lives looking for a fabled "other half" of our broken souls, and why the differences between male and female are never as clear as they might seem.

Gods, too, could be androgynous. Orphic creation myth described the double-sexed Phanes as the original deity. Composed of two aspects—male Eros and female Psyche—Phanes split apart in order to better understand existence. (Later myths cast Eros as a minor god and Psyche as his mortal lover; they endured many trials before being finally united.) The idea of primal divinity splitting into male and female aspects found its way into Qabbalistic mysticism, Gnostic theologies, Hindu scriptures, and Egyptian lore. Twin deities—Isis-Osiris, Fauna-Faunus, Artemis-Apollo, and Amaterasu-Tsukuyomi, among others—were united in conception and split apart at birth. Meanwhile, gods like Nana-Buluku ("*Moon-Sun*") and certain interpretations of Ra retained both gender aspects, with the male sun featured as the divine right eye and the female moon being the divine left one. Shiva and Shakti-Parvati appeared in their androgynous aspect of Ardhanarishvara, sometimes represented as the Yab-Yum ("*Father-Mother*") of Tantric symbology or the Adibuddha ("*Primordial Buddha*"), supreme creator of all else. Gnostic Christ found his counterpoint in Sophia, sometimes represented as Mary Magdalene. Kuan Yin, patron of mercy, is known also by a fey male aspect, Guanyin. It's fitting, really, that Harris Glenn Milstead, pop-culture's first superstar drag queen, also went by the name Divine.

Gods could cross gender lines as well. Dionysus shifted between male and female forms, although cross-dressing couldn't save King Pentheus from being ripped limb from limb by the god's maenad followers. Diana favored masculine garb and pursuits, exacting terrible revenge upon anyone who treated her like a girl. All-Father Odin supposedly dressed as a woman to learn the female secrets of *seidhr*, then turned himself into one in order gain access to his mistress Rind, and manifested as a transgendered aspect named Jalkr ("*Eunuch*"). Thor, perhaps the butchest god of all, appeared as a bridal Freyja in order to win back his thunderbolt hammer Mjollnir. Loki—who had mocked Odin for cross-dressing—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Claude Deruet's Departure of the Amazons—These women warriors out of Greek mythology represent an early example of redefined gender roles

suggested this ironic jest, yet assumed various feminine forms himself, most notoriously as the mare that gave birth to Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir and as Thokk, the giantess who refused to weep for Balder and thus consigned him to Hel's realm. Personally, I'd love to see our waiter's reaction to Thor in drag. Somehow, I suspect he'd be more polite.

As such tales suggest, the Androgyne is often a trickster figure, destroying boundaries and eluding barriers between desire and the established order. Spider-man Iktomi masqueraded as women in order to seduce pretty but unwise virgins; Coyote assumed female form in order to pull off special pranks, while Raven beat his own phallus into pulp and then tricked his enemies into drinking it. Their antics echo back to us each time their descendant Bugs Bunny dons a dress to seduce Elmer Fudd. Laughter, too, is a tension-breaking force. It's not surprising that so many comedians—from Monty Python to Tyler Perry—cross genders while kicking propriety in the nuts.

We cannot be selfish with one another.

— Pell, from *Storm Constantine's The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit*

The Androgyne's male and female elements suggest a being composed of several souls within a single skin. The fox-spirit known as Inari Okami supposedly contains five essences, one of whom is an eerily beautiful androgyne. Mythology's most obvious transgendered figure, Hermaphroditos, was originally born male; conceived by inconstant Aphrodite (another transgressive deity) and the psychopomp Hermes (who also manifested in feminine form), Hermaphroditos was so beautiful that a young nymph, Salmacis, prayed for eternal unity with him. When the god-boy bathed in a spring, the water-girl merged with him and they became a single person, both male and female. Revered in Asia Minor and parts of Greece, Hermaphroditos inspired sects that may well have featured transgendered clergy and attracted physical transsexuals.

A gruesome form of androgyny characterized the Galli, ancient priests of Attis and Cybele. Intoxicated by spiritual devotion (and probably a few other things as well), these men would dance through the streets, whip themselves into wild trances, slash off their genitals, fling the fleshy bits through open windows, grab female clothing from inside, and hopefully collapse into the arms of fellow devotees. Those who managed to survive these self-service castrations lived the rest of their lives as transgendered acolytes. Similar devotions inspired self-castration among the Christian Valesians and *Skoptsi* ("Castrated Ones"); taking the Christ at his word (Matthew 19:12: "*There be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake*"), these men usually retained their masculine gender, if not their masculine parts. Even so, the element of "crossing over" a magical threshold is clear; in folklore and literature, eunuchs like Masrur from "The Tale of Three Apples" and the spymaster "Spider" Varys, from George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series, possess visionary, initiatory, or transitory powers. Centuries later, male members of the Heaven's Gate cult had themselves castrated and then assumed genderless roles in order to be "pure enough" for their intergalactic journey.

(Morbid fantasies about castration probably account for the revulsion men often feel toward androgyny. And although castration in myth and folklore could be an essay in itself, it's not difficult to see why the idea of "cutting away male privilege" and offering it as a strap-on for supernatural femininity might set certain teeth on edge.)

Then and now, such devotees may feel two souls under their skin. Reconstructionists of Native American traditions refer to these folks as "two-spirit people," a recent term that encompasses a variety of gender-crossing social

roles. Drawn from the Ojibwe word *niizh manidoowag* ("two-spirited"), the concept secures a respectful place for the Androgyne within indigenous society. (Anthropology popularized the term *berdache* for such people, but that term is actually an insult; its root, *bardache*, is a French term referring to boy prostitutes.) Assuming social and often magical roles usually granted to the opposite sex, these *winkties*, *nadleehis*, *mexogas,* and so forth occupy a sacred—if unorthodox—place in society. Like South Asian *hijra* ("transgenders"), Thai *phet this am* ("third-genders"), Japanese *onnagata* ("woman-roles"), Italian *castrati,* and other gender-bending figures, these people become luminal characters—prophets, performers, and prostitutes moving through subcultural twilight.

For obvious reasons, that psychic borderland hums with mystic potential. Classical alchemists symbolized perfection as the *rebis*, a hermaphroditic fusion of masculine and feminine elements. The principle was personified within the Yab-Yum and, in more abstract form, as the Taoist Yin-Yang circle. The Greek prophet Tiresias was turned into a woman after striking two mating snakes with his staff; years later, he regained his masculinity after witnessing the same sight, and those experiences—combined with the prophet's ties to Dionysus, Pentheus, Oedipus, and other notables—made Tiresias a key figure in sexual magic. Gustav Klimt and Gustave Moreau painted androgynous apparitions drifting eternally through luminous symbolic underworlds. Along similar lines, occultist Eliphas Levi pictured his Goat of Mendes (the initiator often called *Baphomet*) as a shaggy-headed androgyne whose caduceus cock was balanced by a pair of ripe female breasts. Familiar now as the mascot of Satanic portraiture, Baphomet reflects a symbolic convergence of magical energies. To those who understand the riddle s/he presents, all things become possible.

It is any wonder, then, that we might spy the Androgyne decked out like Drag-ula? In the original 1973 version of *The Wicker Man*, Christopher Lee follows an authentic ritual transvestite tradition; taking cues from Aleister Crowley (who also worked in drag) Lee's imposing Lord Summerisle leads a sacrificial procession while attired as a woman...a capering inversion that's unnervingly absurd. Summerisle may be fictional, but magical cross-dressing is not; the tradition reaches, at the very least, to ancient Egypt, where female pharaohs wore fake beards and male priests wore thick make-up. Common portrayals of the Wizard archetype wear voluminous and often hooded robes which may conceal and even alter gender. Even today, real-life shamans, magicians, priests, and witches often ditch the typical clothing of their sex in order to "move between worlds" to where the usual rules don't apply. Often, like Joan of Arc, they suffer for it, condemned by authorities who refuse to be undone. Even those authorities, however, must bend occasionally to transgression. During medieval Feasts of Fools, mobs—often led by cross-dressing men and women—staged mock rebellions wherein clerics and sometimes princes stepped down for a day to let a Lord or Lady of Misrule (again, cross-dressed or freakishly androgynous) assume symbolic command. Echoes of this practice can be heard each Halloween, or at every midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, where postmodern Lords and Ladies of Misrule dance across the dark.

> *Don't dream it*
> *Be it...*
> *— Dr. Frank N. Furter,*
> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Hidden beauty seems forbidden as well. And because our Androgyne exists beyond conventional gender limitations, s/he appears beyond morality as well. Common folklore presents androgyny as a netherworld where any vice or sin is possible, and while that impression is inaccurate as hell, the image endures. That wolf in Grandma's clothing offers up a wide array of damnations, especially if—as in Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves"—s/he wants more than just a quick meal. The archetypal Androgyne is gorgeously seductive, a beautiful liar with terrifying but tempting revelations in store.

Predatory images linger through popular impressions of androgyny. Aquinas maintained that incubi and succubi were really the same entities; possessed of male and female aspects, they visited men in female forms to draw out sperm, then went among women in male form and impregnated them with the stolen seed. Sadako Yamamura, from Koji Suzuki's *Ring* series, is a spectral hermaphrodite determined to "reproduce" through a mystical psychic virus. Anne Rice's languid vampires, Storm Constantine's seductive Wraeththu, the Sapphic allure of Le Fanu's Carmilla, or the gender-jumping of Virginia Woolf's Orlando...all contain uncanny tension between male, female, and Other, and all remain seductive, hungry, usually dangerous, and all-too-often revealing.

Sometimes—as in the *Ukiyo-e* "Floating World" subcultures of transitional Japan, the Decadent movement of *fin-de-siècle* Europe, the New Flesh fetish underground, and the Gothic Lolita wave—gender rebels seize those ominous stereotypes and turn them into power. Forced toward a monster's role, they embrace and run with it. Like Marilyn Manson, whose *Mechanical Animals* album cover features him as a nude and neutered cyber-androgyne, they craft funhouse mirrors from society's shadows and then shove them in the audience's face. Artists such as Aubrey Beardsley, Vaslav Nijinsky, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Kenneth Anger; authors like Oscar Wilde, Caitlín R. Kiernan, Arthur Rimbaud, and Pat Califia; musicians like Grace Jones, Diamanda Galás, Robert Smith, and of course David Bowie...these Lords and Ladies of Misrule fashion monsters from imagination's cage, twist them into fabulous designs, set 'em loose, and then invite society at large to come out and play. It's no accident that the members of Twisted Sister used that confrontational image as the original cover for their album of that name.

The vinyl edition of 1985's *Come Out and Play* featured a garish pop-up of Dee Snider in heavy metal drag, poised beneath a manhole cover. Pull it open, and a screaming hairy nightmare bursts from the sewer and into your face. No wonder the band scared hell out of cultural guardians from Tipper Gore to Jerry Falwell. This Androgyne was out to wreck your shit and take your kids along for the ride!

("Monster," at its Latin core, means *portent*, *warning,* or *revelation*. Understood this way, our monsters say volumes about us.)

Like many shadow-archetypes, the Androgyne has flourished in the age of mass media. Emerging from the disreputable glamour of the Romantic art movement and Floating World prints and poetry, this archetype epitomized the dark flamboyance of the more sinister Decadent school. Throughout the 1800s, the weird fusion of drugs, art, libertine philosophy, and magic blossomed into the forbidden shadowlands of Mirbeau, Beardsley, and most especially Oscar Wilde. Mocking conventional sex roles through inversion or complete obliteration, the Decadents portrayed (and occasionally embodied) the pallid androgynes later popularized by Rice, Bowie, and Constantine. Although Wilde's Salome was essentially female and his Dorian Grey essentially male, their fey demeanors (and Wilde's as well) presaged and often influenced more aggressive manifestations of androgyny in films like *The Hunger* and *Liquid Sky*. Like most other elements of avant-garde art and lifestyles, these blurred gender distinctions were meant to undermine, transform, and perhaps even demolish society at large. The mincing Dr. Pretorius in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* embodies this tempting transgressor, luring Dr. Frankenstein away from socio-sexual normalcy. From there, it's a small yet significant step from the fall of Frankenstein to the rise of Frank. N.'s Furter—toward "a new world of gods and monsters."

As rigid gender roles exploded in the twentieth century, the Androgyne served notice that the old order was through. Although Diamond Dog Bowie provided the archetype's most visible harbinger, androgyny could be spotted from Mick Jagger's pout to Boy George's hairdo, from Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* to Robert Heinlein's "—All You Zombies—" to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The ragged witchery of Alice Cooper and KISS, the sleek futurism of *The Matrix* and *Ranma ½* , the sweet boys of Year 24 Group, and the grotesque renegades of John Waters... on and on with no end in sight runs a brilliant interplay between fantasy and reality, presided over by our tempting Androgyne. Like Desire and Despair (the Endless twins from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*), the beauty and terror of transgression remains a fixture in postmodern popular culture. Leading us, like Jareth, into a labyrinth of possibilities, the Androgyne continues to outrage and amaze, sledgehammering our expectations and enticing us to join the fun.

"*I ask*," says Jareth, "*for so little. Just fear me, love me, do as I say and I will be your slave*." That's the challenge of our Androgyne. If we dare transgress upon established rules, embrace rebellion and obey a disordered state of order, a heady sort of freedom can be ours. The price of that dominion, though, may be what the band Miranda Sex Garden referred to as "a fairytale of slavery...a seductive garden of earthly delights, full of color and chaos." Like the New Flesh netherworld of London's Torture Garden, this sensual labyrinth could combine heaven and hell and everything in between, wrapped in furious lust and boundless self-reflection. Then again, it might become a fearless paradise. The Goblin King may simply be a dream, a tempter regarding us from the other side of our own mirrors. Like so many other elements of the Androgyne's domain, the ultimate answer remains ambiguous. As any hero understands, the only way to discover where a quest leads is to enter the labyrinth and hope for the best. Either way, like *Labyrinth*'s Sarah Williams, our journey will transform us. In the Androgyne's dominion, by temptation we are changed.

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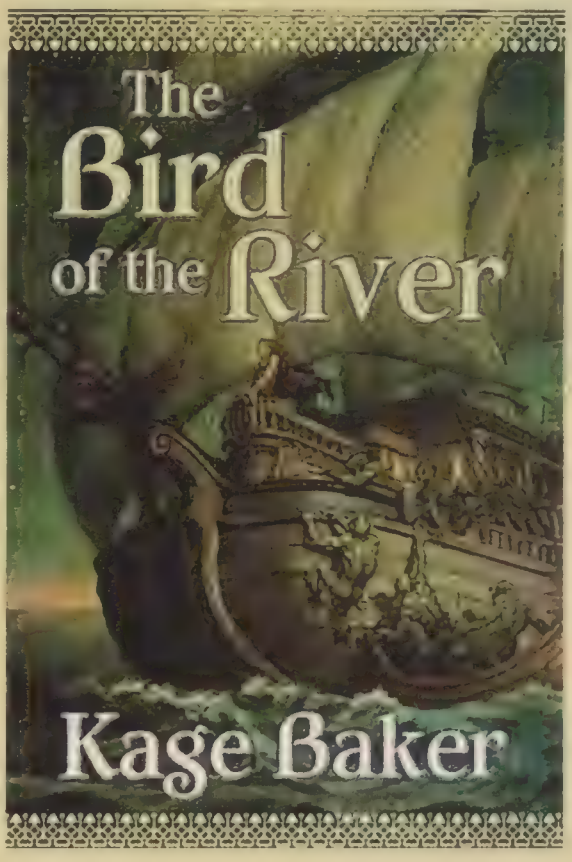
October 2010 Reviews: The Loving Dead, Blood of the Mantis,The Office of Shadow, The Bird of the River, Pariah, Metrophilias, Our Lady of the Absolute

by Paul Witcover and Matt Staggs

The death of Kage Baker earlier this year deprived speculative fiction of a talent that was still growing, branching out in new directions. Her long-running science fiction saga featuring the time-traveling Company had brought her success, but as a reader, I felt that the joy of those characters and that setting had mostly evaporated for her long before the final volume, *The Sons of Heaven*. It was in her fantasies, beginning with *The Anvil of the World* (2003) and continuing in a prequel, *The House of the Stag* (2008), that it seemed to me Baker was once again having fun. Both of these books, set in a richly imagined world shared by two humanoid species, the Children of the Sun and the Yendri, along with a cast of demigods and demons, usually at each other's throats, but occasionally in each other's pants, were breezily and wittily told, with some of the most memorable characters Baker ever created. They succeeded wonderfully as light entertainments but were darker and more ambitious than they at first appeared to be. In fact, *The Anvil of the World* is my favorite of all her novels.



The Bird of the River (Tor, hardcover, 272 pp., $25.99, ISBN: 978-0765322968) is set in the same world as *Anvil* and *Stag*, and it, too, works both as light entertainment and as something more serious. It's every bit as good as its two predecessors, though it also tells a very different kind of story—one much more deliberately low-key: a picaresque romance with elements of mystery thrown in. Where *Anvil* and *Stag*, between them, built a world from the ground up and filled it with larger-than-life characters, *Bird* is content simply to inhabit that world, to present a more ordinary, more human slice of it. Which is not to say that there isn't adventure and intrigue, blood and magic—there is, and plenty of it. But what's at stake isn't the fate of the world, just the lives and happiness of a few more-or-less ordinary people. That's actually a pretty radical notion for epic fantasy! This is more of a mundane fantasy, and I mean that as a compliment.

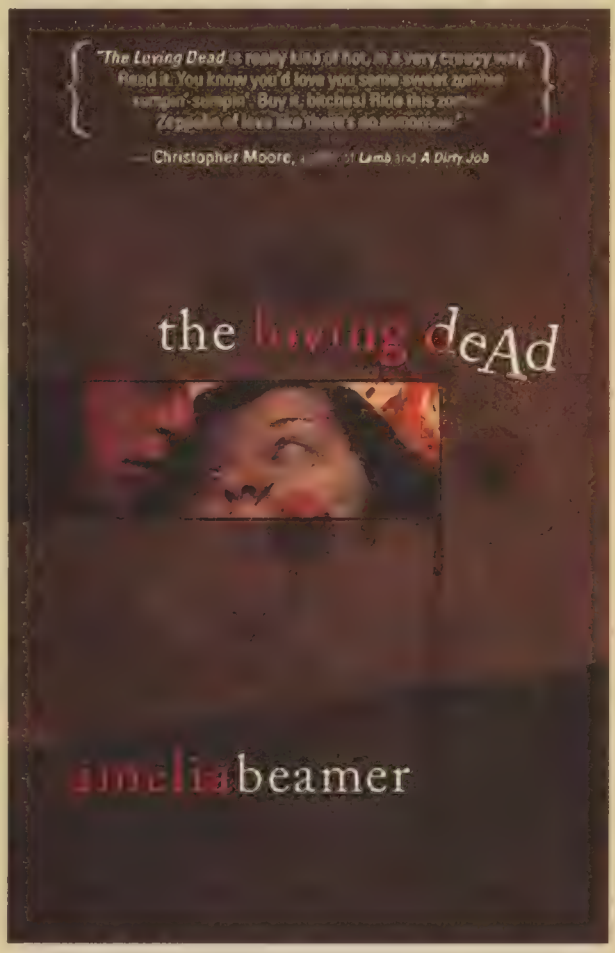
Because of the timing of publication, as well as the caliber of writing throughout, I feel confident that Baker must have revised this manuscript to her satisfaction before her death. That may not be the case with subsequent posthumous publications, but here, at least, there is no question of a slackening of quality.

The novel takes its title from the name of a huge river barge on which most of the action occurs. Falena, a Child of the Sun, is a single mother whose addiction to the herb Yellow has sent her, and her two children, Eliss, the eldest, a teenage girl, and Alder, a half-Yendri boy, on a downward spiral. Her lungs damaged by her addiction, Falena can no longer find work as an ocean diver, her profession; but Eliss, who is nothing if not determined, forced to be the responsible one in the family, taking on the role of mother to her own mother, succeeds in scrounging up a berth for her aboard *The Bird of the River*. Eliss believes, or rather hopes, that river dives will be in shallower water and hence not beyond Falena's lung capacity.

This turns out to be true—but irrelevant to the accident that claims Falena's life, leaving Eliss and Alder orphaned. The first mate of the barge, Mr. Riveter, whose wife and children are aboard, and the captain, a mysterious hulk of a man called Captain Glass, who drinks himself into insensibility on an almost nightly basis, take pity on the two young children and offer them places in the crew. With no other choices, Eliss accepts. In fact, she enjoys life aboard the barge, and quickly makes herself useful by cultivating a talent for spotting submerged branches and other dangerous obstacles in the river. Alder is less happy; being of mixed race, he is a target of thoughtless—and sometimes not-so-thoughtless—gibes and slights from other crewmembers and their children.

The accident that took Falena's life was both grotesque and macabre; she became entangled, underwater, with a

headless corpse. That corpse, belonging to a notorious playboy aristocrat, one Encilian Diamondcut, launches a mystery that becomes a kind of maguffin, driving the plot and the relationships of the various characters, especially after a new member joins the crew: a handsome young man named Krelan, himself something of an aristocrat, who claims to be fleeing one of the blood vendettas common among the rich and bored. But in fact, his appearance is not unrelated to the discovery of the corpse.



Meanwhile, as the barge progresses upriver, and desultory investigations are pursued regarding the dead man, the crew soon encounters more death; it seems a bloodthirsty pirate-cum-revolutionary, one Shellback, with a motley band of criminals and demons, is terrorizing towns along the river, putting them to the torch and generally raping and pillaging. As these violent acts seem in many cases to be inside jobs, the Children of the Sun, the dominant race along the river, naturally begin to suspect the Yendri, who are similar to elves in their peaceful, nature-centric approach to life.

When a Yendri is expelled from a river town "for his own protection," and takes a berth aboard *The Bird of the River*, Alder, for the first time in his life, gets to know another of his kind, and begins to learn the history and traditions of his people. This knowledge begins a transformation that distances him from his sister, who, in the meantime, has begun to develop feelings for Krelan, who, she has quickly deduced, is not what he seems, for she is highly intelligent and observant.

What distinguishes this novel is not so much the mystery and the plot, which Baker handles with smooth professionalism, but instead the inner lives of her characters, especially Eliss, her main character. Eliss, as mentioned, is unusually smart and sharp, but it's her heart that really makes her special, for despite the loss of her mother—first to addiction, and then to death—she has remained open to love. She cares for and protects, to the best of her abilities, her younger brother, but she also finds herself becoming an important person in the communal life aboard the barge, under the bloodshot, beneficent eye of Captain Glass. We see her grow from a tough girl who could easily have been hardened by her experiences into a young woman anyone would be proud to know. Alder and Krelan, too, undergo difficult but ultimately salutary changes as they grow out of their younger selves and into adulthood. Again, there is nothing earth-shattering here; the fate of the universe does not hang in the balance...except in the way it always does, for ordinary people like you and me, as we try to wrest some meaning and purpose, and perhaps, if we're lucky, happiness, from our too-brief lives. This novel was certainly never conceived as such, but I found it a most fitting and affecting memorial to Kage Baker, the writer and the woman.

—review by Paul Witcover

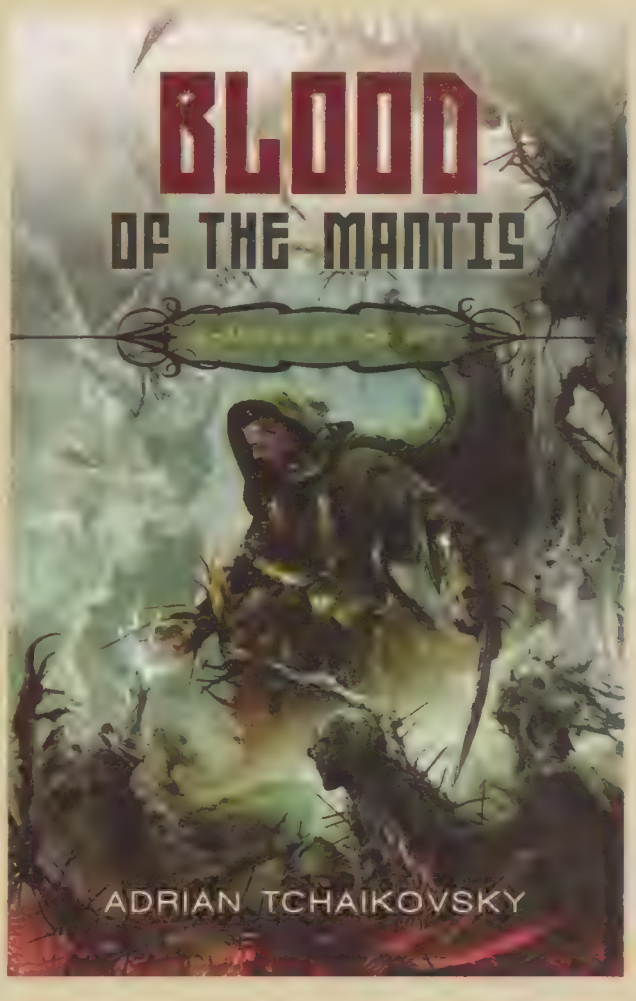
There's much to enjoy in Amelia Beamer's first novel, *The Loving Dead* (Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 256 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1597801942), a brainy, sexy, punny, tongue-in-cheek (and elsewhere) addition to the current craze for zombie fiction. What sets this novel apart is its Oakland-area milieu of bored twenty-something hipsters with aspirations to decadence, who juggle jobs at Trader Joe's with casual S&M-tinged sex, binge drinking, and promiscuous pill-popping. Even before the real zombies show up, these people are already acting the part, halfway toward a goal they don't even realize they're aiming for. Zombies as fetish objects and wish-fulfillment fantasies—it had to happen. Give Beamer credit for seeing the connections and proving that there is still life—or un-life—in this hoary old horror trope.

The novel opens with one of the two main characters, Kate—the other being her roommate and unrequited lust interest, Michael—leaving a belly-dancing class in the company of her tattooed instructor, Jamie. In the all-but-deserted street, Jamie is assaulted by what appears to be a homeless person—and though Kate comes to her rescue, and the two women escape, the encounter will have deadly ramifications. For in the struggle, Jamie has become infected with a new disease transmitted via bodily fluids, a disease with an incubation time that seems to vary depending on whether those fluids are simply swapped saliva or more intimate juices.

Kate brings her distraught instructor back to her place, where Michael is throwing a costume party. There, in the middle of a mutual assured seduction between Jamie and

Kate, the former utters what will soon become two familiar words, drenched in irony: "Something's happening." For that, after all, is the grail these sons and daughters of anomie are seeking—something, anything, to happen.

When it happens, it happens fast—a sudden shift in sensuality from hot tongues to sharp teeth. Beamer's version of zombiehood is still about eating brains—and just about any other portion of the human anatomy—but she foregrounds what has, until now, mostly been the erotic subtext of the genre. This disease seems to make people hornier—it's one of the recognizable symptoms, as the book goes on—yet in truth, the expressive displays of sexuality and lustful hunger triggered by the disease are not too far beyond what is already common in Mike and Kate's world of casual hookups and voyeuristic teasing, where irony is a shield against experience, not the hard-earned result of it. Beamer's zombies hunger for us—and we lust for them. It's the perfect symbiotic relationship.



Of course, Beamer's characters are all knowledgeable about zombies. In fact, as one character says early on, before the carnage has even begun, "You know, I think our generation is possibly a little too concerned about zombies." Not concerned enough, as it turns out. But thanks to the education slackers everywhere have imbibed osmotically via the films of George Romero and *Shaun of the Dead*, they are well-equipped—better equipped than others—to survive the zombie apocalypse. Also helpful in this regard is Wade Davis's classic *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*, which provides the useful information that the sound of a cracking whip can bring a zombie under control—nicely tying in to Beamer's S&M focus. Yet again and again, despite their superior knowledge, the kids succumb, as kids always do—through stupidity, inattention, intoxication, and lust. Thanatos is as strong in them as Eros; indeed, they are two sides of the same coin.

Really, this novel is less about zombies than it is about sex and relationships, from the puerile and dangerous flirtations of Mike and Kate, testing their boundaries and defining their adult selves, to the narcissistic power trips of another character, Audrey, who wields her whip with the zeal of a born dominatrix, to the complex exchanges, monetary and otherwise, between Kate and her "boyfriend" Walter, a balding fifty-something-year-old married man she met on Craigslist, who pays for the pleasure of her company and other things. In many ways, this relationship is the most poignant of the novel, not just because the characters make a true—if bizarre—connection, but because of the gulf of age and experience—one might even say culture—that separates them and grows wider as the novel progresses.

Beamer moves her plot along by set-pieces: the zombie attack at Mike's party, where Jamie is just the first falling domino; another zombie attack on a zeppelin tour high above San Francisco (this one, involving Kate and Walter, is particularly well done); and a final showdown on Alcatraz, where our main characters, and others, flee in hopes of either escaping the plague or better defending against it.

Throughout, Beamer's writing is sharp, funny, sexy, and appropriately gory. A whole lot of somethings happen... and fast. The main action takes place over the span of perhaps a full day. But it's in an epilogue set ten years later that Beamer brings a less frantic and more reflective tone to her novel, taking the outrageous deadpan comedy of the book into a more somber and human—or is that post-human?—place.

—review by Paul Witcover

In my last column, I promised a review of the final volume of Adrian Tchaikovsky's Shadows of the Apt trilogy, *Blood of the Mantis* (Pyr, trade paperback, 310 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1616141998). Here it is—only first allow me to scrape some egg off my face, because in fact the Shadows of the Apt is *not* a trilogy but an open-ended series, with a fourth volume due in September and a fifth lined up after that... with perhaps more to come. So, my apologies to the author and to readers. Now—after the customary spoiler warning—to the volume at hand.

Tchaikovsky's fantasy world is richly thought out and strikingly conveyed; it draws from a number of sources—from Tolkien to Lovecraft to steampunk—without ever seeming derivative; it is familiar without being predictable. In this world, humans long ago bonded with (now mostly

extinct) giant insects, entering into totemic relationships that endowed each tribe, or kinden, with various magical or quasi-magical abilities related to the qualities, metaphorical and literal, of their chosen insects. Those kinden with the strongest magical and physical prowess enslaved the others. But a subsequent distinction arose more recently, when the oppressed kinden, perhaps via some variant of evolution, developed technological abilities utterly absent in their masters. These kinden, called the Apt, used their newfound knowledge to overthrow their Inapt masters and relegate magic to a secondary status in a new world order based on scientific and technological advances.

But every silver lining has its dark cloud, or in this case its black and gold cloud. Those are the colors associated with the empire of the Wasp-kinden, a martial, xenophobic Apt society ruled by Alvdan the Second, a sociopath intent on world domination. The atavistic remnants of the former magically sustained empires are no match for the ruthless efficiency and weaponry of the Wasps, and not even the other Apt kinden can stand against them for long—there are many parallels to World War II in these novels, and the Wasps are clearly cast in the role of the Nazis.

The Winston Churchill of this world is Stenwold Maker, a Beetle-kinden professor in the Lowlands university town of Collegium, who has been warning of the Wasps for years, only to see his warnings ignored...and then, practically too late, heeded. The first two books in the series, *Empire in Black and Gold* and *Dragonfly Falling*, relate the beginning and early battles of the war against the Wasps, which for the most part goes badly for the allied kinden of the Lowlands, who must put aside their traditional mistrust and, in some cases, outright enmity, in order to stand against the common foe. Although some important victories are won, thanks largely to Stenwold and a network of spies and agents he trained and put into place over the years, the Wasps are not defeated, only delayed.

Tchaikovsky has a big cast of characters that expands with each book. The main characters, in addition to Stenwold, are: his niece, Cheerwell; her Moth-kinden lover, Achaeós; a Mantis-kinden warrior, Tisamon, and his half-Spider daughter, Tynisia; Salma, a Dragonfly-kinden prince turned bandit; Totho, a student of Stenwold's who has since, with ever-lessening pangs of guilt, put his engineering expertise to work for the Wasps; Thalric, a former member of the Wasp SS equivalent, the Rekef, now under sentence of death from his former masters due to a distant power struggle, who has temporarily allied himself with Stenwold, perhaps only the better to betray him and win back his position in the Empire; and Uctebri, one of the last of the repulsive Mosquito-kinden, an Inapt sorcerer who practices his dark arts upon Alvdan and his sister Seda, promising both of them eternal life and eternal rule. New characters appear in this book, chiefly Taki, a Fly-kinden orthopter pilot around the huge lake called the Exalsee, which lies on the border of the Spiderlands and the Wasp Empire, and is about to become a flashpoint for events many miles distant.

The key to Uctebri's schemes is an ancient magical artifact: a so-called Shadow Box filled with a malign intelligence and immense destructive power. This object, though poorly understood, first surfaced in *Dragonfly Falling*, where it became a secondary objective of both the Wasps and the allies; now finding and possessing it becomes of primary importance, and the rest of the war takes a backseat. Tchaikovsky keeps his main characters in play, dispersing them widely across the Lowlands and its environs in order to convey the full extent of what is happening in multiple theaters of war—in Exalsee, in the Ant city of Sarn, in the Wasp capital of Capitas, and in Szar, the Wasp-conquered capital of the Beekinden—but there is no question that the events surrounding the Shadow Box are the most crucial, for they will decide not only the outcome of the war but whether or not a resurgent magic will revenge itself upon the technology that dethroned it. Those events are set around Lake Limnia, which is located close to the border of the Wasp Empire and the Dragonfly Commonweal—you can see that Tchaikovsky is concerned with in-between places, places that are part one thing and part another, or have dual claims upon them. This interest extends to his characters as well—half-breeds like Totho and Tynisia, as well as full-breeds like Thalric, Stenwold, and Achaeos, who find themselves crossing over borders of belief, habit, or loyalty. It's the willingness to cross borders of all kinds that sets the humanist culture of the Apt, as it has evolved in the Lowlands, against the rule of the Inapt that preceded it and the Apt totalitarianism exemplified by the Wasps. In many ways, while Stenwold and his allies have a strong resource in their relative open-mindedness, tolerance, and intellectual curiosity, their strongest resources lies in their ability, however tenuous and unsought, to love those outside the narrow bonds of kinden and kinship. In making this point, Tchaikovsky definitely lets actions speak louder than words.

One quibble I have with this volume is that a bit of lazy plotting and character work creeps in. New characters are introduced whose purpose is all too plainly to advance the plot in a certain direction. These little dei ex machina pop up more than once. Generally, and I feel it's probably the case here as well, this occurs when an author is plotting on the fly and hasn't left him or herself sufficient time before publication to go back under the hood and do necessary preparatory work. It may also be related to Tchaikovsky's ever-expanding roster of viewpoint characters. At any rate, it imparts a certain jerkiness to the plot; this novel is less technically adept than *Dragonfly Falling*, which really was a superbly executed fantasy of its type. In *Blood of the Mantis* I got the sense of an author stretching himself too thin, and scrambling to cover over the weak points of plot and character. Still, *Blood of the Mantis* adds to the luster of what is already a significant accomplishment.

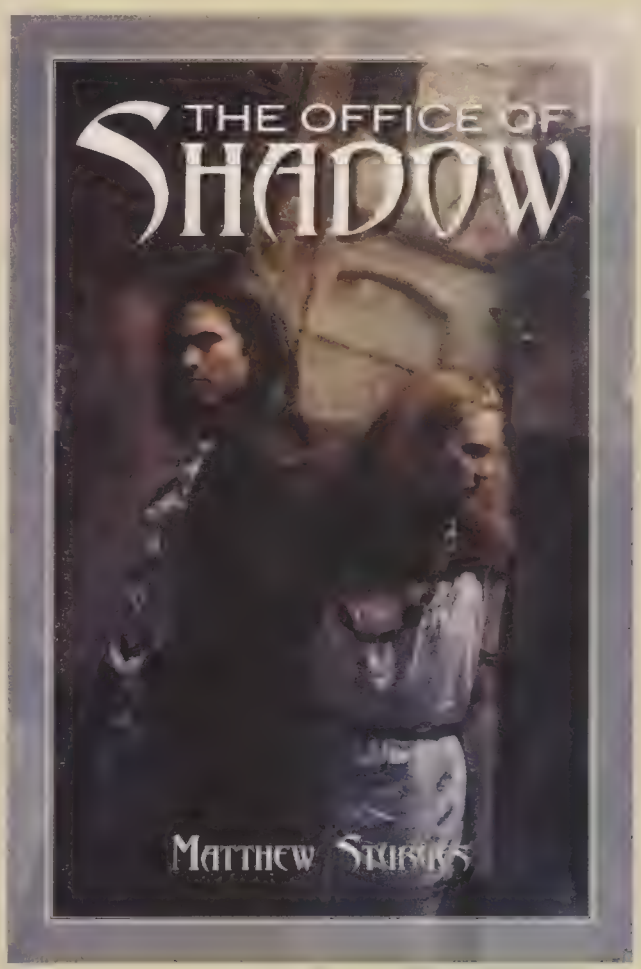
—review by Paul Witcover

Matthew Sturges's *The Office of Shadow* (Pyr, trade paperback, 424 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1616142025) is the sequel to *Midwinter* (2009) but can be read as a stand-alone; all the necessary backstory is either smoothly inserted or readily inferable. This tightly and inventively plotted novel kept me turning the pages but ultimately left me disappointed, because certain key plot points hinging on the actions of main characters are insufficiently prepared in terms of motivation and psychology—very like my point above regarding *Blood of the Mantis*.

While Sturges is capable of powerful, precise writing, when it comes to romance and the emotional side of relationships, something is missing—a certain shallowness prevails, with the result that the actions and choices of characters can seem arbitrary or hurried—and unfortunately, this crops up more frequently as the novel progresses, a barely noticeable annoyance in the taut opening sections but a real distraction by the time the climax comes crashing down and characters start behaving in ways that seem, well, out of character, which is about as much as I can say without introducing spoilers. It's all the more baffling in that Sturges conveys the complexities of political intrigue with deft flair; he's more at home in a court of power-seeking backstabbers than in the equally fraught if perhaps less overtly violent realm of the heart.

The fantasy spy novel has been championed by Pyr. I'm thinking of Mark Chadbourn's excellent *The Silver Skull*, as well as books by James Enge and Jon Sprunk. Even the Shadows of the Apt series has a strong spy flavoring. All these novels combine magic and tropes of faery—whether or not called by that name—with the kind of world-weary yet baroque cloak-and-dagger machinations of Cold War-era le Carré.

In Sturges's world, the Cold War analog pits the Seelie kingdom of Queen Titania—who stole the mind and power of her husband, King Auberon, on the day of their marriage—against the Unseelie empire of Empress Mab. There are no good guys and bad guys here, no simple fight of good versus evil; rather, it's about muddy gradations of morality, of the ends justified by perhaps equally reprehensible means, and the inevitable corruption that accompanies work in the shadows, literal and otherwise.



The title of the novel refers to the semi-secret, officially disavowed Seelie spy network, run by the minister of foreign affairs, a Machiavellian string-puller named Lord Everess, who acts for the benefit of the realm...but identifies himself so strongly with the realm that his actions are sometimes indistinguishable from self-interest. The day-to-day operations of the Office of Shadow and its spies—called Shadows—are left in the able hands of a former Shadow, Paet, grievously wounded in body and, perhaps, mind by a run-in with the Unseelie counterpart of the Shadows, the chillingly named Bel Zheret. Shadows are trained to be amoral killers; enhanced with forbidden magic, they manifest more than the normal faery allotment of magical Gifts. The Bel Zheret, similarly molded from Unseelie stock, are more powerful and demonic; they have retained far less of whatever was original to them, and have no free will whatsoever—instead, they are in thrall to the will of Mab. The Shadows, on the contrary, retain enough free will to be troubled by the morality of what they have been asked to do and to grieve the price of it.

The long-standing balance of power between Seelie and Unseelie has been upset by a powerful new Unseelie weapon, a kind of bomb called the Einswrath—think of it as a nuke whose potency derives from magic—or *re*, as it is called here—rather than science. Five years ago, the Seelie city of Selafae was struck by an Einswrath and completely destroyed—that was one blow in a wider war that ended in a precarious stalemate after Seelie forces defeated the Unseelie at the Battle of Sylvan. Since that time, Lord Everess, Paet, and Titania have been frantically trying to discover the secret of the Einswrath... and wondering why Mab has not employed the weapon again. Is it because there was only one? Or, rather, is Mab using the present lull in overt hostilities to stockpile them, preparing for a devastating strike against multiple cities, obliterating the Seelie kingdom at a stroke?

To learn the answers, Titania turns to the Shadows. But due to the depredations of the recent war, Paet is the only one left—thus new Shadows are required. Everess recruits Perrin Alt, Lord Silverdun, a Seelie nobleman who acquitted himself heroically at

Sylvan (see *Midwinter*). Silverdun is a reluctant hero and even more reluctant spy; when Everess finds him, he is in a monastery, attempting to lead a life of renunciation in accordance with the precepts of the Arcadian religion, a kind of gentle amalgam of Christianity and Buddhism. Until recently, the Arcadians were persecuted by the Seelie, and they are still at risk in Mab's domains.

The prevalent religion for Seelie and Unseelie alike—though it is viewed by the sophisticated and the intellectual as little more than a myth—is the chthonic faith, which postulates a pantheon of gods defeated and bound by a legendary faery hero, Uvenchaud. The Einswrath, in fact, is rather sacrilegiously named after the chthonic god of war.

Everess also recruits Ironfoot, a brilliant reitic scholar and thaumaturge who is also no slouch as a soldier, and who has been investigating what's left of Selafae, trying to reverse engineer the Einswrath from data left behind, and Sela, a dangerous living weapon, crafted by a cruel Seelie lord for his own selfish purposes but since liberated, in a manner of speaking, for so deadly and difficult to control are her powers that she must be perpetually bound with a special iron bracelet that dampens her abilities. She is naïve and good-hearted, yet profoundly damaged by her childhood experiences. Everess runs a real risk in employing her. But the stakes are too high not to.

Sturges's approach to magic, or *re*, is impressive. He gives it a pseudo-scientific footing, and many chapters are prefaced by excerpts from technical or theoretical reitic studies that make fascinating reading. His magic system is internally consistent and makes sense in a way that doesn't insult the intelligence...yet which doesn't take itself too seriously, either. Indeed, there is a strong current of humor running through the novel—tongue-in-cheek here, but more overtly witty where Silverdun and Ironfoot are concerned; the two men, very different in temperament, develop a light, bantering partnership that grows into something more.

Of the three Shadows, Silverdun takes center stage, though Sturges also gives us access to the thoughts and feelings of Sela and, to a lesser extent, Ironfoot. Sela's inexperience makes her fall head over heels for Silverdun, whose brooding and sarcastic personality she mistakes for something deeply romantic. Yet Silverdun is not as shallow as he at first appears—or as he seeks to appear. In bygone days he led a carefree, sybaritic life, squandering his patrimony and thoughtlessly seducing and casting aside every pretty lass who came his way—until he met an actress named Faella, who, when spurned, used her Gift to forever mar his flawless looks; ever since, Silverdun has begun to develop a conscience, and to think of Faella with a longing whose object has little to do with revenge. So we have a triangle sketched out: Sela falls for Silverdun, Silverdun pines for Faella, and Faella, meanwhile, cannot forget Silverdun.

As I said, this aspect of the novel is the least successful—unfortunately, for it is the fulcrum upon which certain plot elements will hinge. But luckily, there is more to the novel than this triangle—namely, the mystery of the Einswrath and the cloak-and-dagger missions that the three Shadows undertake to solve that mystery—missions that take them deep into enemy territory, and expose evidence of a traitor closer to home. Here Sturges acquits himself much better.

I don't know if there will be another book in the series; Sturges has certainly left an opening for one. But if so, I hope that he fleshes out the emotional dimension more fully; his failure to do so here doesn't seem due to a lack of talent but rather to a kind of blind spot. Whatever the cause, the result is a novel that, despite its many strengths, falls short of what it could or should have been.

—review by Paul Witcover

Pariah, Bob Fingerman, Tor Books, trade paperback, 368 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-0765326270 Review by Matt Staggs

The zombie apocalypse has come to New York, and a small group of beleaguered apartment dwellers have little to do beyond await their seemingly inevitable doom. With food supplies running short, the only question that the survivors have about their future is whether they'll be eaten by the undead masses or starve first. The arrival of a mysterious girl with the inexplicable ability to walk through the city's zombie-clogged boroughs unscathed brings relief from the interminable boredom and access to much needed supplies, but some of the building's residents won't rest until they know the secret of her powers.

As the residents bubble over with curiosity regarding their savior, her own seemingly incurious nature and borderline apathy toward her new friends becomes the source of gossip and suspicion. Some suspect her of being a servant of God, others the Devil. Others wonder if there's a far more prosaic explanation for her ability: one that has something to do with her backpack full of pills. Can the residents gain her ability? Is there hope yet that they could escape the building and once again walk the streets unharmed?

Readers may know the author's previous novel *Bottomfeeder*, and much like his treatment of vampirism in that book, Fingerman once again re-

invigorates what has become a horror trope—zombie survival horror—with a mix of New York bustle and his own trademark misanthropic humor. The close quarters shared by Pariah's besieged residents spark clashes of culture and ideals, something that the author recognizes and exploits to its full comedic potential while aptly utilizing the horrors outside the walls as a source of contrast. Like all of the best writers in this subgenre, Fingerman realizes that the real meat of the story lies with the human characters and the choices they must make to survive, not with the anonymous zombie hordes.

Pariah offers plenty of laughs and gruesome horror in equal measure, and fans of zombie horror would be well advised to move this to the top of their reading list. This is sure to become a classic of the genre.

***Metrophilias*, Brendan Connell, Better Non Sequitur, trade paperback, 102 pp., $12.00, ISBN: 978-0974323572 Review by Matt Staggs**

Metrophilias is a new collection of thematically connected pieces of short fiction by fantasist Brendan Connell. A slim book at only 102 pages, *Metrophilias* nonetheless encompasses a whirlwind tour of thirty-six cities, offering fleeting glimpses of the erotic pleasures sought by their inhabitants.

A conjurer longs for and receives the caresses of the dead; a groomsman is seduced by the pleasures of absinthe; a duelist falls fatally in love with his favorite sword. These are only a few of the sometimes tragic but always perverse expressions of love within this book. Occasionally the pursuits of these rare pleasures take the reader into the territory of Magic Realism, but Connell's fiction largely remains within the realm of the possible, albeit the boundaries are often stretched to an infinitesimal point.

While the subject matter at the heart of this daring experiment in fiction will ensure that it isn't for every reader, the lyricism of Connell's prose, and his ability to employ the same unflinchingly to the portrayal of the most outré expressions of human venality, is worthy of recognition. This collection should, at the least, cement Connell's reputation as fantasy literature's reigning Neo-Decadent.

***Our Lady of the Absolute*, Resa Nelson, Mundania Press, trade paperback, 236 pp., $12.95, ISBN: 978-1606592359 Review by Matt Staggs**

While more than a few contemporary fantasy authors have looked to the splendor and might of ancient Egypt as a source of inspiration for their own creations, few have done so as memorably as Resa Nelson in her newest novel *Our Lady of the Absolute*.

Meres, a scribe devoted to the service of the Pharaoh, a living god, and his retinue of priests and sages, falls afoul of the royal authorities when her path crosses with Nefertita, a foreigner in the city. Following the apparent execution of her husband, Meres flees her home to search the banks of the Nile for his body, only to find that she is not the only person to have been expelled from the Pharaoh's court. Her journey, as well as that of her fellow travelers, becomes one of revelation as they learn that everything they know about their lives could be a lie.

Astute readers will begin to suspect something is up well before Nelson's characters do, but Nelson's well-crafted tale is entertaining to the last page. Nelson is particularly astute at depicting the relationships between her female characters, particularly as they re-evaluate their lives in the wake of the story's world-changing denouement.

When it comes to Egypt and its culture, Nelson knows her stuff. *Our Lady of the Absolute* features many of that land's gods and goddesses among its cast, and there are a few plot points and locations that take their inspiration directly from the Egyptia *Book of the Dead*. However, while the trappings of *Our Lady of the Absolute* are drawn from the mythology and culture of ancient Egypt, the novel's central theme of skepticism toward institutional wisdom will resonate well with an audience all too familiar with the corruption and duplicity shown by real-world authorities.

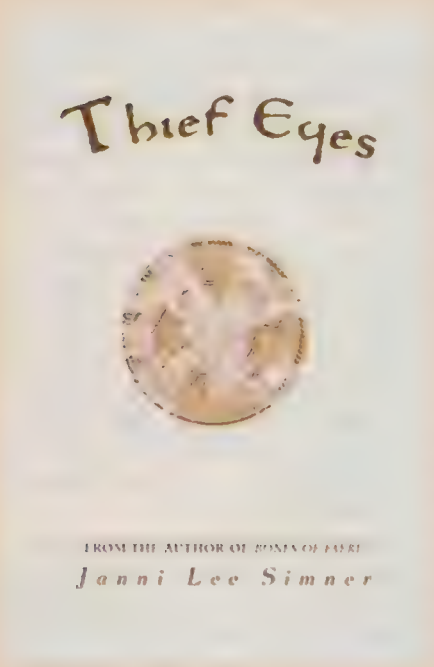
When a writer plays with the expectations of her readers there's always the chance that it may backfire. Such is not the case with Nelson's novel. Readers may begin *Our Lady of the Absolute* only to learn in short order that the book isn't exactly what it seems, but it is the estimation of this reviewer that most will be pleasantly surprised.

October 2010 Book Reviews: Thief Eyes, Black Blade Blues, White Cat, Discord's Apple

by Elizabeth Bear

Janni Lee Simner's ***Thief Eyes*** (Random House Books for Young Readers, hardcover, 272 pages, $16.99, ISBN 978-0375866708) is a charming and inventive contemporary fantasy aimed at the YA set, but deft and sophisticated enough to be perfectly enjoyable for adult readers. Haley, an American girl, has come to Iceland with her geologist father to search for her missing mother. Haley meets up with Ari, a local boy who is something more than he seems, and the mystery leads them both into grave peril when Haley falls afoul of the same ancestral curse that claimed her mother, and which has stalked every woman in her family since it was originated by her many-times-great-grandmother Hallgerd.

Simner does an excellent job of using her source material (*Njal's Saga,* in particular) to create a creditable fantastic threat in the present day. Norse legendry and history is an interest of mine, and Simner's understanding of the stories she uses as source material is more than skin-deep. The scariness and apocalypse of the source material is well reflected here.

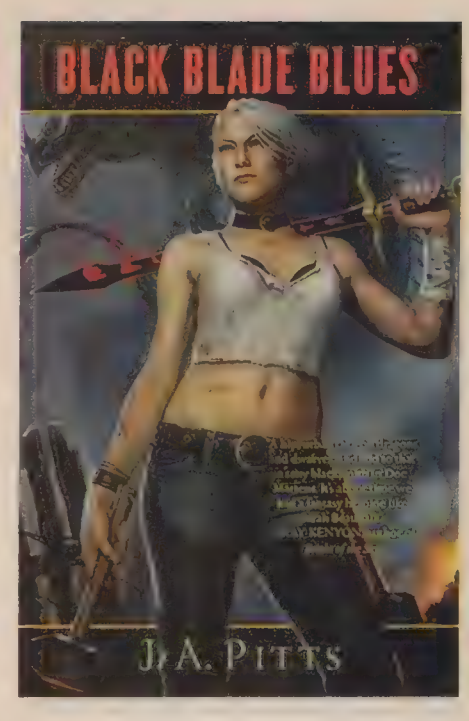


It's a smart book, without easy answers, and Haley's struggle to integrate her childhood perceptions of her parents with adult realities rings very true. If I have a complaint, it is perhaps that the pacing feels a little erratic, and there's a thread of emotional resolution that gets handled in perhaps too tidy a fashion at the end.

By contrast, J. A. Pitts's debut novel ***Black Blade Blues*** (Tor Books, trade paperback, 400 pages, $15.99, ISBN: 978-0765327932) also deals with problematic parent-child relationships through the lens of updated Norse myth. Unfortunately, while there's a lot of good here, the book as a whole did not work as well for me.

I adored Pitts's protagonist, Sarah Beauhall, a young blacksmith struggling with finances, her place in the world, serious anger management issues, and the tension created between her oppressive religious upbringing and her love affair with another woman, teacher and Society for Creative Anachronism member Katie. She's a delight, and I greatly enjoyed the scenes in which Sarah is smithing and dealing with a perhaps-untrustworthy dwarf.

My problems with the novel were mostly ones of craft, and as it is a first novel, I'm reluctant to be too hard on it in that regard. Suffice it to say that exposition is somewhat crudely handled, and for this reason the second half of the book is a much smoother read than the first half. There is an early flashback that detracts significantly from the narrative momentum, and a great deal of character information is told (sometimes over and over again) rather than demonstrated.



Also, while I like a good rollicking SCA story as much as the next person (being a former SCAdian myself), I'm afraid I didn't quite buy that story thread here. The book also suffers from copyediting infelicities ("deprivations" for "depredations" at least twice being my chief complaint). Also, I really did not believe that the genie was that easily put back in the box at the end—everything wound up just a little too tidy.

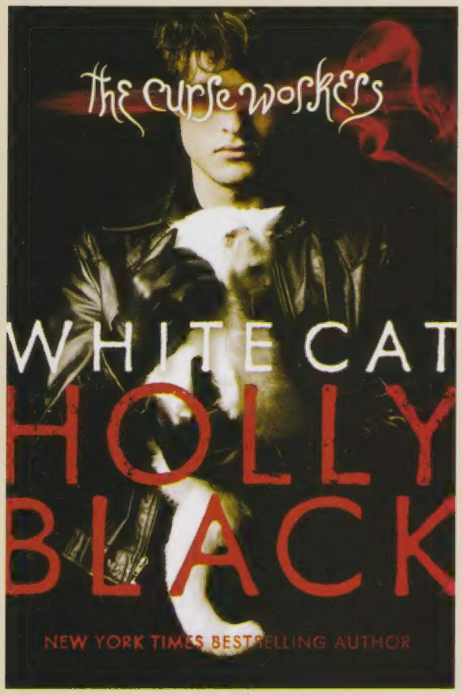
However, the old man with the pizza box who [redacted for spoilers] pays for a lot. As does the tripartite alliteration in the title.

While we're on the subject of colors, I'd like to mention ***White Cat*** by Holly Black (Margaret K. McElderry Books, hardcover, 310 pages, $17.99, ISBN: 978-1416963967), another purported YA novel with a lot to offer adult readers. Unlike every other book in this month's review column, *White Cat* does not revolve around updating an existing mythology. Instead, it invents its own.

Callum, the protagonist, is the ungifted scion of a venerable family of "curse workers," which is to say people who have the ability to manipulate

certain well-defined aspects of the natural world—including but not limited to luck, memory, or emotions. At the commencement of the story, Callum is about to be suspended from boarding school for sleepwalking, and we soon learn that he was responsible for the death of a childhood friend, Lila—who happened to have been the daughter of a curse worker crime family.

Callum's mother is in jail for illegal



emotion work (all curse work has been driven underground by a Prohibition-style blackball law), and so during his suspension he is given into his grandfather's care. Together, they begin cleaning out his parents' house (his parents were hoarders, so this is an undertaking of epic proportions) and Callum learns that all in his history is not as it has been presented.

The reader will undoubtedly figure out the book's central mystery before Callum does, but since Black manages to pile killer twist on killer twist to a conclusion that managed to blindside me completely. I'm looking forward to the next installment.

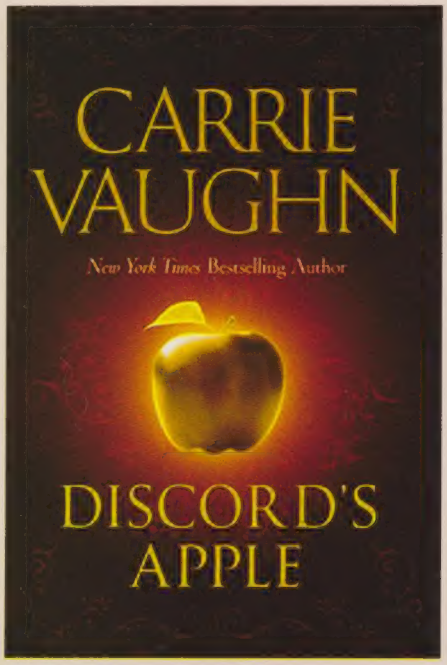
Not Norse myth, but Greek is the focus of ***Discord's Apple***, by Carrie Vaughn (Tor Books, hardcover, 304 pages, $23.99, ISBN: 978-0765325549). Vaughn, who is well known for her Kitty Norville series, has gone in a completely different direction with this book. *Discord's Apple* is a sorcerer's-house book, a subgenre that has always amused me. In this case, the inevitable ancestral house that the protagonist—successful comic book writer Evie Walker—is about to inherit has a storeroom in the basement, and that storeroom is full of bits of things from fairy tales: Cinderella's shoes, Excalibur, and Orpheus's lyre among them.

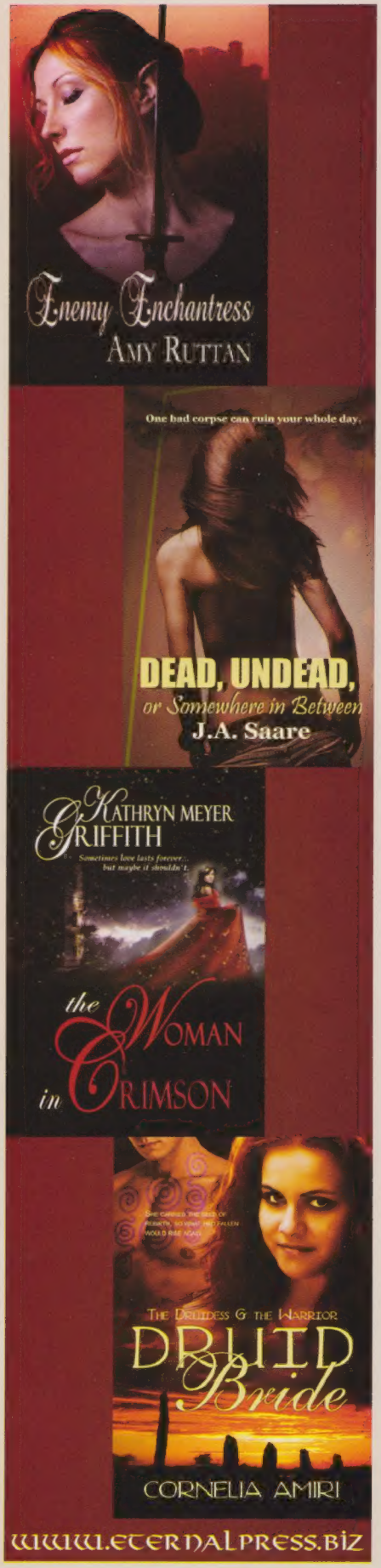
One of those objects is, unsurprisingly, the Erisian golden apple of the title—the one the goddess of discord threw among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, inciting the Trojan War.

Now it is three thousand years later, and Hera is still determined to get that apple away from Aphrodite, though Aphrodite has been dead nearly as long.

In addition to an urban fantasy, the book is also near-future sociological science fiction, positing a world in which terrorism and security measures have gone a little farther than today, and in which major powers teeter on the brink of nuclear exchanges (and sometimes topple over).

Add in a survivor of the Trojan War cursed by the god Apollo and yet another complex family dynamic between Evie and her dying father, and the book is a winner on all fronts.

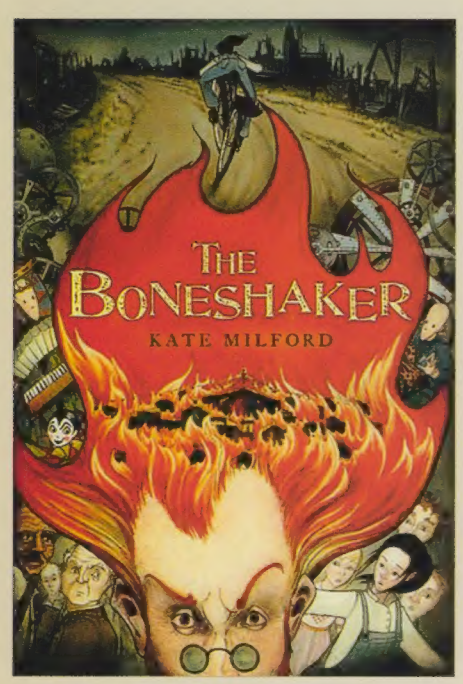


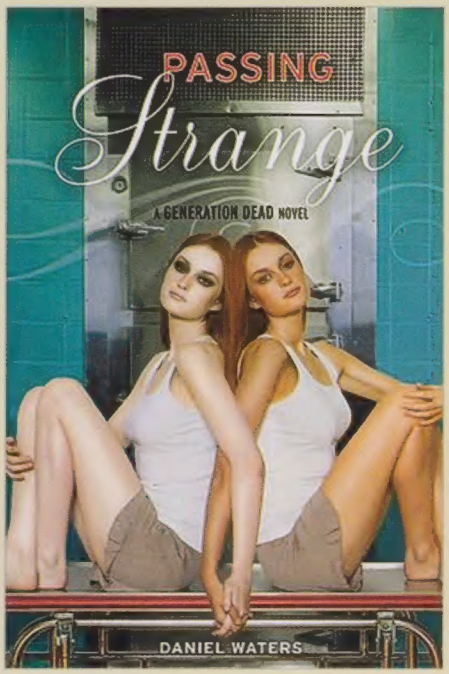


Young Adult Fiction

October 2010 Young Adult Fiction Reviews: The Boneshaker, Passing Strange, Perchance to Dream, The Mermaid's Mirror, For the Win

by Michael Jones



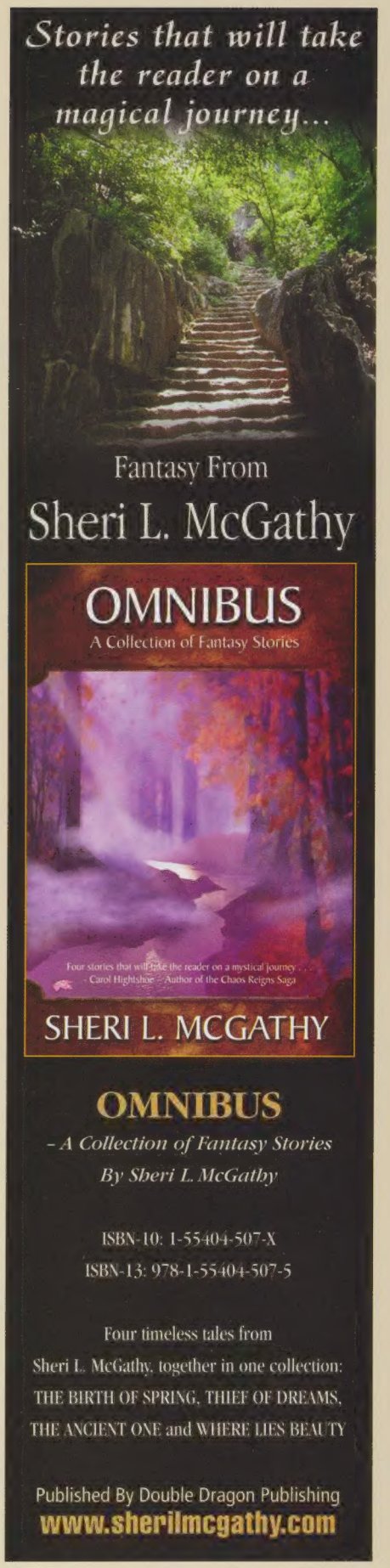


The Boneshaker, **by Kate Milford, Clarion Books, hardcover, 372pp, $17.00, ISBN 978-0547241876**

It's 1913, and in the small crossroads town of Arcane, Missouri, anything can happen. When a traveling medicine show stops for repairs, bringing with it all manner of bizarre technological contraptions and dubious cures, Natalie Minks is alternately fascinated and worried. Even at a glance, she knows something's not right with Dr. Limberleg and his companions. What she discovers will strike at the very heart and soul of her beloved home, leading to an epic struggle for survival. A historical steam punk fantasy drawing inspiration from trickster tales, deals with the devil, and other folklore, this book's crammed full of nifty ideas and awesome moments. Unique and wonderful, featuring a feisty, resourceful heroine, this book's definitely a don't-miss under any circumstances.

Passing Strange, **by Daniel Waters, Hyperion, hardcover, 386pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1423121992**

In life, Karen DeSonne passed as straight, afraid to reveal her true orientation. In death, she's passing as one of the living, a zombie girl hiding in plain sight. Even as bigots fan the flames of hate and intolerance against the "differently biotic" and make it nigh impossible for zombies to go out in public, Karen's going undercover to try to save her friends. But when she starts dating noted anti-zombie zealot Pete Martinsburg as part of the process, will she betray everything she holds dear? *Passing Strange,* like the others in the Generation Dead series, is a brilliant, poignant, compelling examination of the relationship of the outsider to society, with zombies standing in for any group you care to imagine and Karen as a protagonist worth cheering for.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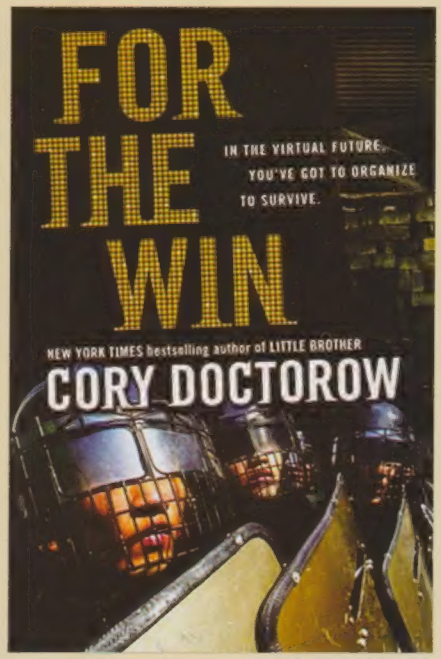
Perchance to Dream, by Lisa Mantchev, Feiwel and Friends, hardcover, 334pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-0312380977

Having come into her power as the Mistress of Revels, Bertie Smith has left the Theatre Illuminata in search of Nate, her pirate friend who was kidnapped by the sea goddess Sedna. With Bertie, as always, are the alluring air spirit Ariel and a gaggle of mischievous Shakespearian fairies. With nothing going as planned, Bertie will have to do a lot of improvising if she wants to rescue Nate, find her true father, discover her true origins, puzzle out the extent of her feelings for both Nate and Ariel, and make sure the show goes on. The sequel to *Eyes Like Stars*, this is another rousing adventure of literary and theatrical whimsy, filled with sly twists and humorous moments. Bertie's continuing story deserves multiple encores and a standing ovation.

The Mermaid's Mirror, by L. K. Madigan, Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, hardcover, 320pp, $16.00, ISBN 978-0547194912

Lena has always felt an inexplicable tie to the ocean, and it's grown stronger of late, as if calling her. On the verge of turning sixteen, she's determined to learn how to surf, despite her father's unyielding objections. But even as she takes to the water, she discovers the truth about her mother who supposedly died in the ocean years ago: she was a mermaid. Given a chance to embrace her long-hidden heritage, Lena leaps at it, but will her new family and the mysteries of the deep seduce her away from the life she's always known? Lyrical, romantic, and captivating, this aquatic coming-of-age tale makes for a fun, satisfying read.

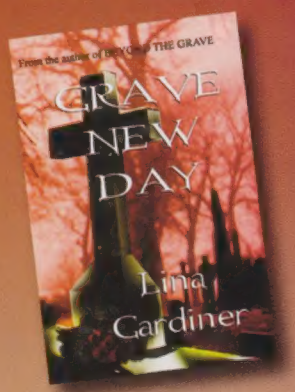

FOR THE WIN
IN THE VIRTUAL FUTURE, YOU'VE GOT TO ORGANIZE TO SURVIVE.
NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of LITTLE BROTHER
CORY DOCTOROW

For the Win, by Cory Doctorow, Tor Teen, hardcover, 474pp, $17.99, ISBN 978-0765322164

In the near future, an underground global economy has become fully realized, based on the understanding, manipulation, and acquisition of the virtual currencies of various online multiplayer games. With "gold farming" sweatshops scattered across the world, and entire fortunes made and lost with the click of a mouse, it's a way for desperate gamers to make a living doing what they love. But a crisis point has arrived as the farmers globalize, mobilize, and unionize, clashing with those who would exploit them. Caught up in this struggle are teens from America, India, China, and more, fighting for the future online and in the streets. Once again, Doctorow is on the cutting edge with this exciting blend of economic theory, technological advances, game theory, and social activism. This isn't just another YA adventure, it's a manifesto for a new generation of Internet-savvy thinkers and doers.

Grave New Day

by Lina Gardiner



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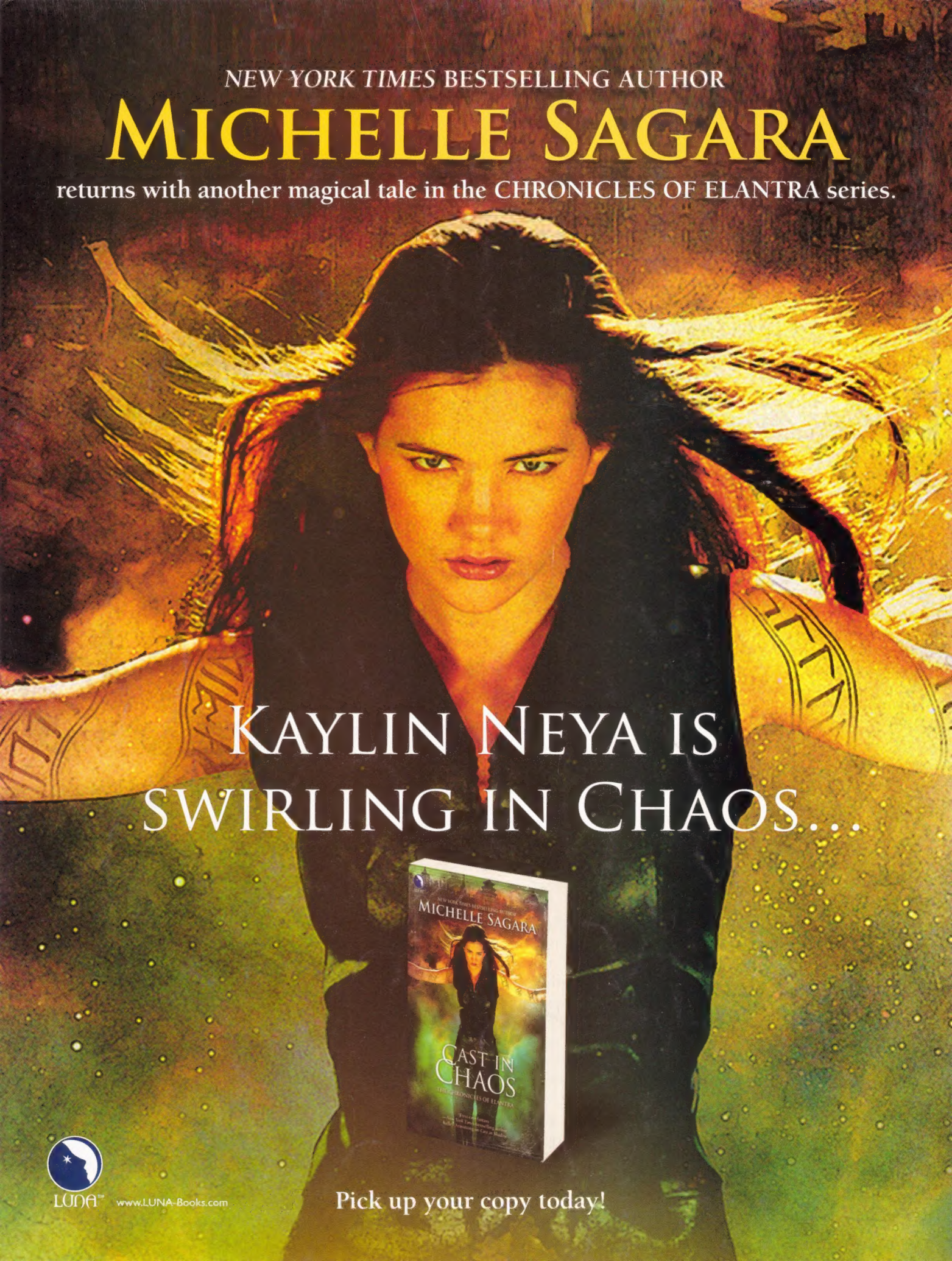

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